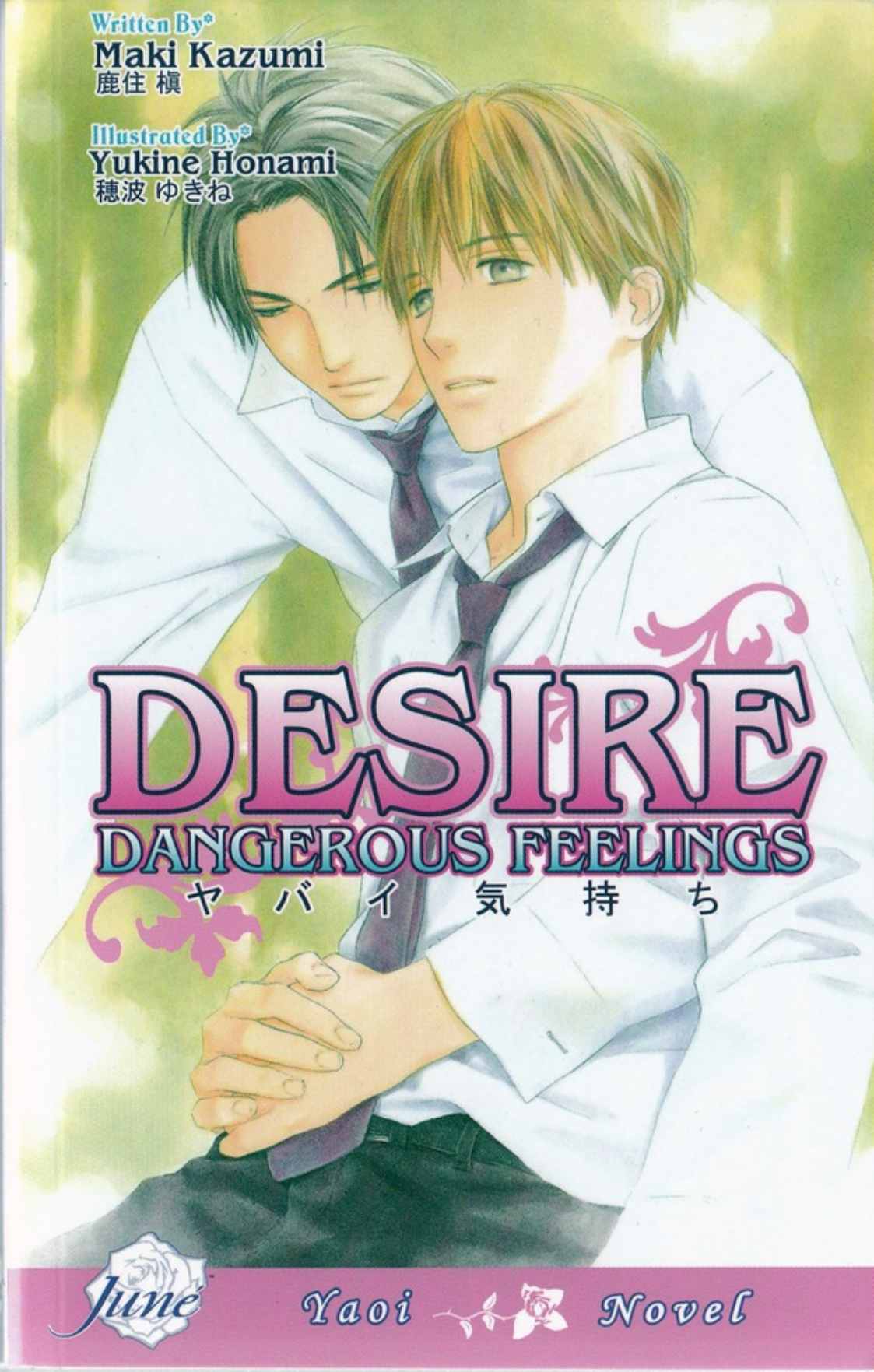


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DESIRE

DANGEROUS FEELINGS

ヤバイ気持ち



Yaoi



Novel

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"I wonder why, when I look at you, I get turned on."

Those words—uttered so suddenly, so unexpectedly—turn Toru's world upside-down. He can't believe that his best friend and secret love Ryoji has just said those words to him. His disbelief turns to shock when Ryoji later proposes to have sex with him, just to ease his curiosity. Toru agrees, just to find out if his feelings will cool off afterwards. But what if they don't? What if Ryoji insists on having *just* a physical relationship? What will Toru do then?

Toru soon realizes that being the center of Ryoji's affections isn't without its own drawbacks. As Toru struggles to cope with antagonizing rivals, he finds himself seeking the guidance of the class president, Keigo. Ryoji, on the other hand, finds himself unable to understand his own conflicting feelings. Can the two ever come to terms with how they really feel about each other?

This light-hearted story, a novelized version of the popular manga, chronicles the relationship between two high school boys as they go from friends to something more.



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Toru & Ryoji



Keigo Kashiwazaki

DESIRE

DANGEROUS FEELINGS

ヤバイ気持ち

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June
Los Angeles

DESIRE DANGEROUS FEELINGS

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Desire-Dangerous Feelings

“I wonder why, when I look at you, I get turned on,” Ryoji Nakajo suddenly said to Toru Maiki.

The two were eating lunch as usual on the roof of their school, and had just been talking normally. Then, Ryoji had suddenly gone silent for a few seconds and said those words. He said them with a serious look on his face, with no hint of a smile, but maintaining the light tone of voice he had been using all the while.

For a moment, Toru didn’t get the meaning of what Ryoji had just said. Then he froze. The croquette he had been holding with his chopsticks fell to the concrete floor with a plop.

It was as if everything was in slow motion. Ryoji’s eyes followed the croquette, and, as it reached the ground, he murmured in a calm voice, “It fell.”

At that moment, all the sounds around Toru came rushing back into his ears, as if time had been frozen and then started moving again. His heart was beating really fast now. Finally, he began to understand exactly what Ryoji was saying.

“What did you say?” he asked, to mask his extreme surprise.

Ryoji looked awkward as he said, “It’s so weird. Why do you think that happens?”

“Um...” Toru didn’t know any better than Ryoji.

How should I answer? Why is Ryoji even asking me this? Is this some kind of harassment or something?

Even though he thought he might be overanalyzing the situation, he knew he had to give a safe answer somehow. Otherwise, he might reveal that he had been secretly harboring feelings for Ryoji for a while now.

He wasn't sure exactly when the change within him started, but by the time he had realized it, he had already started to care for Ryoji as more than just a friend. He knew the feelings he had for Ryoji were dangerous. They were what a boy his age would usually have for a girl. Of course, he had no intention of confessing to Ryoji, so he kept his secret hidden deep inside of him.

But sometimes those troublesome feelings would surface and cause him some pain. Like when he once saw Ryoji playing in the swimming pool and smiling like a little kid. Or when Ryoji would casually touch him, or when he would feel Ryoji's breath on his cheek. Toru's heart would then race and his chest would tighten.

He now wondered if Ryoji had caught on to his secret, and had asked him that question to see what Toru's reaction would be.

Now that he thought about it, Ryoji had been staring at him searchingly this whole time. His gaze was strong, and Toru thought he saw a wicked look deep in his friend's eyes.

No, it's just my imagination. He quietly chalked it up to his own thoughts of harassment, as he shook off any meaning to Ryoji's gaze.

There was no way Ryoji would accept his feelings—they were the same sex and, even more

importantly, they were friends. Ryoji wasn't a close-minded person, but Toru thought that developing something beyond friendship was just not possible.

If their relationship would be destroyed by Toru revealing his feelings, he would rather keep them to himself and continue being just friends. It was painful whenever he thought that Ryoji might marry someone in the future. But keeping his feelings in check was better than losing his friend altogether.

Toru and Ryoji, and one other boy, Tadashi Yamauchi—all three had met at the beginning of high school. They were all very close and hung out with each other a lot.

Ryoji and Tadashi were more outgoing, while Toru was more of an introvert. This made everyone around them, including Toru himself, wonder why they were friends. But the two other boys felt comfortable around him.

Tadashi was the cheerful mood-maker of the group, and he was a very observant person. Toru thought Tadashi was a great person, but he felt differently towards Ryoji—who made his heart jump in his chest. Toru couldn't help being attracted to Ryoji's brisk, blunt personality. His feelings just naturally grew until he realized he was in love with his friend. After that, his feelings just snowballed and kept growing. He would get jealous when he would see Ryoji touch anyone else or talk innocently with others. He always struggled to not let his emotions show on his face.

So how had Ryoji figured it out? Toru puzzled. He thought he had hidden his attraction fairly well. So

when had he given away any clues? At any rate, he couldn't believe that Ryoji would test him like this. His chest tightened as he realized he couldn't act strangely now because Ryoji might be baiting him into telling the truth.

"How the hell should I know?" he finally said, his voice sounding angry on purpose. "Why would you even ask me that?"

Ryoji must have thought Toru was joking. He brushed Toru's words off with a vague smile. But then he looked down as if he felt guilty. His smile turned sheepish. "Yeah...I guess you're right." He scratched his head, but when he raised his face again, his usual smile had returned. "Sorry I asked you such a weird question. I guess you're right. I don't know, so why should I expect you to know, either," he said in a forcibly cheerful voice. He absentmindedly munched on his sandwich. "Just forget it ever happened, okay?" he added in a short, disappointed voice.

But Toru couldn't forget something like this just because Ryoji told him to. He looked at Ryoji, who was eating his lunch with a bitter look on his face. Ryoji had said, "I get turned on." Those words repeated themselves over and over again in Toru's mind until they lost all meaning. There was no way that Ryoji had really meant them, right? Ryoji himself had said he didn't understand it, so Toru didn't think that Ryoji shared the same feelings as him.

"Hurry up and finish eating so we can play basketball in the gym," Ryoji said nonchalantly as he crumpled up his trash and stood up.

"Just go on without me." Toru didn't feel like sitting there and eating his lunch like nothing had happened. He wished Ryoji would just go away. But if he closed his lunch box right away, Ryoji might say, "Aren't you going to finish it?" or "Are you feeling all right?" Toru didn't want Ryoji to think that he had lost his appetite because of their conversation. He also didn't want Ryoji to think he was thinking too much about it, either.

"Why? I'll wait," Ryoji replied.

That was typical Ryoji. Even though Toru was a slowpoke, Ryoji would never leave him behind. He always waited for him. Toru loved that about him, but right now it was troublesome. Toru reluctantly moved his chopsticks.

"Oh, you guys are still here?" Tadashi came through the door with an exasperated sound in his voice. "I thought lunch ended a long time ago," he said as he plopped down next to Toru.

"I can't help it. Toru's a slow eater, so I'm waiting for him," Ryoji said in a teasing voice, sitting down once again.

Even though Ryoji was joking and smiling as usual, Toru felt like yelling at him.

"It's your fa—" Toru swallowed his complaint of "*It's your fault!*" He shut his mouth with a snap. He felt Tadashi give him a suspicious look so he quickly changed the subject. "Anyway, didn't you get in trouble, Tadashi? What'd the teacher say?"

Tadashi scowled, annoyed. "I wasn't really in trouble. He just yelled at me a lot. He said if my grades

go down some more I have to quit my club activities. But he just said the same shit he always says and I was starving so I was only half-listening," he added, laughing.

Ryoji chuckled as well, and said, "It's because you always fool around before tests. You asked for it."

"Shut up," Tadashi retorted. "Like you have any room to talk."

"I do. My grades haven't plummeted like yours have," Ryoji said arrogantly.

Tadashi smacked Ryoji's head. "I totally blanked out and guessed the wrong answers on the exam. I always had good luck before, but I guess my luck's run out. But still, Sensei didn't have to be so mean!"

"See?" Ryoji said. "If you had listened to me, you would've been okay."

As he watched his two friends chattering away, Toru quietly gathered up his lunch box. That day after their fourth period, their homeroom teacher had called Tadashi out into the hall. His class rank had dropped after their midterm exams, and the teacher wanted to ask him what had happened.

But, even though Tadashi's class rank had dropped, he still had better grades than Toru. Ryoji was always in the top thirty of their grade.

Maybe they're just smarter than me, Toru thought. He felt that he was fighting a losing battle. It wasn't fair that his friends were both good-looking, did well in school, and were good at sports. But, despite the big difference between them and Toru, he was proud that he was their friend.

"There's only six months left of club activities anyway," Tadashi continued. "And it's not like I want to be an Olympic athlete or anything, so I can always quit. But it pisses me off that he blamed my grades on extracurricular activities."

Ryoji nodded. "I know. Because you don't even go to your club! I'll probably retire from the swim team after the first semester of third year. I did want to swim during summer break, though..."

"But we'll be busy studying for exams next summer, right? Like we'll have time to go swimming. Huh?" Tadashi said in a surprised voice as he and Ryoji looked towards Toru. "Oh, you're already finished eating?"

You should have said so, Ryoji's scowl seemed to say.

"Um..." Toru wanted to say, "But you guys were busy talking," but decided to just keep quiet.

Even though he had been chattering away, Tadashi had still cleaned up his lunch faster than Toru had done.

"Kay, let's go. Hey, what about you, Toru? What'll you do about your club?" Ryoji asked as they stood up.

"What do you mean?"

"You want to go to an art college, right? Then you should probably stay in the Art Club until you graduate."

Toru tilted his head and then spoke after considering it a little. "I don't think I have to completely retire like you will in the Swimming Club or the Track Club. I think I could handle extracurricular activities

and studying for the entrance exam, so I think I won't 'officially' retire. I'll just participate whenever I feel like it."

The two boys nodded at Toru's vague answer.

"By the way, you know that guy, Kashiwazaki-san?" Tadashi said as if he had just remembered. "He should be studying for the entrance exams, but he's always in the Art Room. Everyone who's in an art-related club is like that."

Toru was impressed that Tadashi knew Kashiwazaki. He couldn't remember who was in Ryoji's team or Tadashi's club. He wasn't sure if their memory was really good or his was really bad. No, he decided it was the latter. Then he decided to stop thinking about it altogether.

"I heard he got the school's recommendation for his college," Toru said as he thought of Keigo Kashiwazaki, who was the president of the Art Club.

"Seriously?" said Ryoji. "He's got that kind of face, but he's really smart, too. I totally thought he would go to a state university." There was something blunt about the way Ryoji spoke.

"What kind of face?" Toru asked.

Tadashi laughed. "A beautiful face. Like he'd look good with makeup on."

Toru chuckled as he thought that Keigo would probably be angry if he knew they were saying that about him. Keigo might look sweet on the outside, but he was pretty masculine on the inside.

At any rate, Ryoji really was acting like nothing had happened during lunch. He was his usual, cheerful

self. Toru almost wondered if he might have imagined the serious look in Ryoji's eyes earlier. As they headed to the gym, he felt those unreasonable feelings well up inside him again. But he couldn't complain about it.

As they got closer to the gym, they heard footsteps running up from behind them.

The three of them stopped at a girl's high-pitched voice calling out, "Nakajo-senpai, can I talk to you for a second?"

Toru looked up at Ryoji. He was about a head shorter than Ryoji, so when he looked at him, he always had to look up. "Is she a freshman in your club?"

"No, I don't know her," Ryoji said coldly, but there was a slight grin on his face.

Seeing the situation, Tadashi grabbed Toru's arm. "We'll go ahead!"

Toru could see from the pin on the girl's uniform that she was a freshman. He wondered if she was going to confess her feelings to Ryoji. It was something of an everyday occurrence, so he wasn't that surprised. Ryoji was very popular with girls, and Toru knew his friend played around with them when he felt like it. He knew that, but he just couldn't get used to the ache he got deep in his chest when he saw it happening.

"Don't tell me he told you that," Tadashi suddenly said, peering at Toru's face as they entered the gym.

"What?"

"That he gets turned on. He told you didn't, he? That's why you're acting like this."

As usual, Toru was speechless at Tadashi's shrewdness. Tadashi's voice sounded more accusatory

than questioning though, as if he knew the answer already.

Toru wondered if Ryoji had told Tadashi before telling him.

"You know about that?" Toru asked.

"He told me this morning," Tadashi said in an indifferent tone. "We rode the bus together."

Unlike the calm Tadashi, Toru's eyes were swimming with shock and frustration. "W-what do you think? I wonder why he said that..."

"I dunno. He has no integrity. And you have a cute face, so maybe he does get horny when he looks at you. But it's not like he can't get a girl or something."

What Tadashi said was unbelievable. As he listened, Toru's ears turned bright red.

"But I don't think it's that important," Tadashi continued quickly. "Just don't worry about it."

But, of course, Toru couldn't not worry about it.

"Just don't get carried away by the mood," Tadashi added. "If you get caught up in one of his whims, you're the one who'll get hurt."

He stared at Toru, whose body stiffened in response.

Does he know? Toru thought, his eyes growing dark. He had tried his best to hide his love for Ryoji, but was Tadashi acting like this because he had known Toru's secret all along?

Even though Toru knew that it was probably best not to ask, he still couldn't be silent. "What...do you mean?"

"Hm? Nothing. It's just that he's a beast! He'd

attack anyone, whether they were his friends, or guys, or anything. Just be careful. His specialty is 'hit it and quit it,'" Tadashi answered teasingly.

Toru was relieved that Tadashi apparently hadn't realized his secret. "Idiot. Like he'd attack me," he tried to say calmly, an awkward smile pasted on his face.

"You never know. You're pretty absentminded."

"I am not!" Toru declared indignantly. Tadashi started to rub his head. "Let go, Tadashi!"

But Tadashi wouldn't let go and started to tickle Toru.

Suddenly somebody pulled Tadashi off of Toru. "What are you doing, screwing around in the doorway?" Ryoji said in a slightly angry voice.

"Oh, are you done already?" Tadashi asked. Ryoji nodded. "What's wrong? Did you make her cry again?"

"Nah, I said yes."

"No way!" Tadashi said in surprise.

Toru was so surprised he couldn't speak. He knew that Ryoji didn't have any particular girlfriend at the moment. Ryoji had broken up with the older girl he had dated last year, and after that he just screwed around with whoever he wanted.

"Is she your type?" Toru asked hesitantly as he stared at Ryoji.

Ryoji sighed. "I'm just taking her for a test drive. Anyway, she's pretty cute and she's got big tits, so..."

"So you're just gonna take advantage of her? See, Toru? I told you he was like that." Tadashi lowered his voice and added, "He's an immoral beast."

"What did you say, you bastard?" Ryoji said

indignantly. Toru turned around as Ryoji and Tadashi started to fight playfully.

"Toru? Where're you going?" Ryoji asked stopping the mock fight.

"Art Room," Toru said, waving to them. "I forgot something. Sorry."

"Hey, wait a second!" Ryoji called angrily.

But Toru pretended not to hear. He couldn't be near Ryoji when he felt like this. Ryoji was going to start dating that freshman girl. She seemed pretty easy, and Ryoji moved fast so their relationship might get physical really fast. And Ryoji would probably start talking about it a lot...since they were friends. When Ryoji had been going out with his last girlfriend, Toru hadn't realized his feelings yet. So, even though Toru thought it was annoying to hear all the details of Ryoji's exploits, he didn't have that crushing feeling he now had in his chest. He could bear it if Ryoji was just talking about screwing around with a girl, without her being his steady girlfriend. But that wasn't the case this time.

Toru remembered Ryoji's words: *"Anyway, she's pretty cute and she's got big tits, so..."*

He tried to remember what the girl looked like, but couldn't. He had thought Ryoji was going to turn her down, so he hadn't paid much attention to her. He began to feel that he was going to cry soon as he rushed into the Art Room. Luckily the room was unlocked so he could hide in there for the time being.

"My...chest..." Toru clasped his hand over his heart. It was pounding so hard he thought it would explode. He touched his chest gently and wondered what

it would be like to have breasts there like a girl.

"Are you in pain, Maiki?"

Toru had thought that the room was empty. He jumped at hearing the voice that called out to him. It was Keigo Kashiwazaki, the boy he and his friends had just been talking about. Keigo rushed over to Toru.

"Club President...you're here?"

"Yeah," Keigo answered. "I don't have classes this afternoon so I was killing time here. But anyway, are you..."

"I'm fine," Toru lied.

Keigo looked relieved. He combed his long hair out of his face, smiling. It was the smile of a "beautiful face," just as Tadashi had said.

Third-year students had electives in the afternoon, and sometimes they would go home early if they had the afternoons off. But Keigo had faithfully come to the Art Room every day, so Toru figured Keigo must like hanging around there.

"What about your classes, Maiki? Lunch will be over soon."

Toru couldn't think of an explanation. "Oh...well, um..."

Keigo sensed that there was something Toru didn't want to talk about, so he changed the subject. "Think you can do the end-of-year project?"

Toru didn't answer, but scratched his head. At the end of each year an art competition was held in their district. Each school would submit about five paintings. Everyone in the Art Club was preparing for it.

However, Toru couldn't think of anything to

paint. A lot of people inside the club expected him to submit his work, but he was weak when pressured. The more people expected of him, the less he wanted to do anything. "I don't know what to paint..." he finally said in a quiet voice.

Keigo looked at him kindly. "Just paint whatever you want. There's no specific theme. Why don't you try painting what's inside of your heart?"

"I guess..." Toru said vaguely, as he thought that that kind of abstract suggestion just made him more confused.

Ryoji's words rose up in his head. They were being chased by Tadashi's warnings not to get carried away, and then the girl's voice calling out to Ryoji. He knew that thinking about these things wouldn't help anything, but, at the same time, he couldn't stop thinking about them.

Ryoji started to date the freshman girl, Ayano Sakagami. She had a small, cute face, slender arms and legs, and a large chest. She knew how attractive she was so she was full of self-confidence. Toru couldn't help but feel envious of her. Judging by the way the Ryoji acted nowadays, it was like he had completely forgotten the things he had said to Toru.

After all, he had said, "Just forget I said that," so Toru thought maybe it was time he forgot about it, too. He decided he would stop thinking about the serious

look on Ryoji's face on that fateful day.

"Ryoji-senpai!"

Toru, Tadashi, and even Ryoji's faces looked annoyed at the sound of Ayano's high-pitched voice.

"She's calling you," Toru said coldly.

"I know," Ryoji grumbled. "God, she never gives up."

"Hey, your precious girlfriend is here. Is that any way to talk about her?" Tadashi teased him. "We know you're really happy to see her."

"But do girls usually just barge into upperclassmen's classrooms?" Ryoji said between sighs. "And she doesn't even care about her actions. Just because we've slept together once or twice, she's starting to act like my wife. It's beginning to get annoying."

Toru's heart pounded and his body stiffened.

Tadashi leaned forward with excitement. "What? You mean you already did it? Isn't it a bit early? You move too fast."

"She was the one who opened her legs," Ryoji said bluntly. "It seemed like not eating a feast set out in front of you so I went ahead and did it."

"Just go talk to her," said Toru. "She's annoying."

The whole time they had been talking, Ayano had been calling Ryoji's name nonstop. Toru could almost see the hearts in her eyes. Their female classmates started to glare at her and harass her, but Ayano didn't look fazed. Toru was jealous of how shameless and confident she was.

"Toru? You're going to make people have the

wrong idea," Tadashi commented.

"Huh? The wrong idea?" Toru echoed.

"Like you're checking out your best friend's girlfriend," said Tadashi.

"I am not. She's just cute," Toru said, waving both hands about.

"Oh, really?" Tadashi laughed. "Is she cute? I think your face is a lot cuter than hers."

"What?" Toru shot back, bewildered.

"Nothing. Just talking about common opinion."

"Even if you compare her to me..."

"Don't worry. Even if you're a guy, you still beat her," Tadashi said loyally.

"No, that's why you can't compare her to me," Toru retorted.

"Let's just eat lunch. Just forget about him. He'll probably eat with his girlfriend anyway."

Toru nodded at Tadashi's words and began to eat his lunch even though he had no appetite.

Ryoji had already made love to Ayano. He had touched her with his hands, kissed her with his lips, and gone deeply inside of her.

Toru felt like he was going to have a breakdown just thinking about it. He thought if every day would be this stressful, then he would die.

Ryoji didn't know about his feelings. Toru didn't want him to know, and he had no intention of telling him. So he couldn't accuse Ryoji of being insensitive because he liked divulging things about his relationship with Ayano.

Toru wondered how much pain he could bear. He

had no idea that Ryoji would be making things more complicated. Toru couldn't have even imagined what Ryoji did next.

"Hey, did you think about it?" Ryoji suddenly asked Toru as they left the Chemistry Room. Tadashi had gone to the bathroom, so he and Toru were walking together. Other students bustled about around them, but they paid no attention to the two friends.

"About what?" Toru said, genuinely wondering what Ryoji was talking about.

"What do you mean about what? Did you already forget?" Ryoji asked, annoyed.

"How am I supposed to know what you're talking about?" Toru replied.

Ryoji bent down and whispered, "What I asked before."

Toru felt his cheeks flush at the sudden sensation of Ryoji's breath against his ear. He had no idea Ryoji would bring up such a thing in the middle of a public place.

"I told you," Ryoji continued quietly, "you make me horny. So what do you think? Do you know why? Did you think about it for me?"

Toru angrily pushed Ryoji away from him. "You're sexually harassing me!"

Ryoji pouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Sexual harassment!"

"Why? I'm serious—"

"I thought you said to forget about it? You said to act like you had never said anything! So I haven't thought about it. I had completely forgotten it until you

brought it up just now!”

“What? You’re so cold.”

“You’re the one who’s cold!” Toru yelled, trembling. He couldn’t believe Ryoji would bring the topic up again even though he had a girlfriend. He felt his chest tighten. Of course he couldn’t just blurt out what he really wanted to say. He was merely Ryoji’s friend, and it was wrong to have feelings that went beyond that. He had no right to be angry at Ryoji, and he was in no position to blame him. So the only thing he could think of was to call this sexual harassment.

All he could do was answer Ryoji’s angry silence with silence of his own. They both continued walking to their classroom without making eye contact.

After sixth period was over, people started to gather up their belongings. Some were going to their extracurricular activities and some were going straight home.

Ryoji, still looking angry, left the classroom without a word. Toru thought he was the one who should be angry, but he still couldn’t help but feel guilty about his own attitude.

He wondered if he should have been more kind and heard Ryoji out. But he had no idea how he was supposed to respond to someone telling him he made them horny. There was no way he could just say, “Oh, same here. Don’t worry about it.”

“Toru? What’s wrong?” Tadashi asked as he noticed Toru still sitting absentmindedly in his chair. “Did something happen with Ryoji? Aren’t you going to your club?”

“Oh. Yeah, I was just about to leave.”

“You’ve been acting weird since fifth period. Did you guys fight or something?” Tadashi’s tone of voice sounded light, but his face was serious.

Toru couldn’t keep quiet anymore and said, “Ryoji...said something weird again.”

“Like what he said before?” Tadashi asked.

Toru nodded. “I told him I forgot about it and he got pissed off. Of course I wouldn’t think about that conversation anymore. What do you think, Tadashi?”

“Well...” Tadashi sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “I’m not even sure myself. He said that whenever he’s having sex with his girlfriend and comes, he thinks of you. That’s not very good for either you or his girlfriend.”

“What? He didn’t tell me that,” Toru said, his eyes wide.

Tadashi clapped his hand over his mouth.

“What does that mean?” Toru prompted. “Ryoji told you all of that?!”

“Well...I think it would be kind of weird telling you that himself, right? But I guess people don’t normally go around telling other people they make them horny, either.”

“Is it true?”

“What, that he thinks of you when he comes? I think it’s true. Eh, don’t worry about it,” Tadashi

said in a carefree voice, but Toru smacked him on the shoulder.

"Of course I'll worry about it! How can I not?" Toru complained.

"It's probably just puberty," Tadashi answered. "He's confused. I heard it happens all the time, thinking of another guy."

"It does?" Toru's eyes widened at Tadashi's frank statement. Did that mean his feelings for Ryoji weren't strange, after all?

"Of course," Tadashi said firmly. "I heard it's really common in sports-oriented clubs. Like guys will jack each other off. It's even common to have your first kiss with someone of the same sex."

"D-did you?" Toru stuttered.

Tadashi laughed. "No, not me."

Toru felt relieved at his friend's carefree attitude about the whole thing.

"So don't worry about it," said Tadashi. "Ryoji'll get over it soon enough. There's a time and place for that kind of honesty, but just forgive him. He probably doesn't mean any harm."

Toru knew he had already forgiven Ryoji. But he also thought that if Ryoji had never told him those things that stirred Toru's feelings up, Toru might not have gotten angry in the first place.

"Okay, I'm gonna go now." Tadashi waved and went off to the Track Club.

Toru watched him leave, and then sighed.

As Toru worked on his sketches, Keigo called out, "Maiki, someone's here for you."

Keigo pointed to the hallway and Toru stood up. Who would come for him during club time?

He opened the door, but there was no one there. He walked out into the hallway, closed the door behind him, and looked all around. He saw a shadow in the corner of his eye, and his heart pounded. "Ryoji?"

Ryoji's shoulders seemed to relax when Toru called his name. "Hey, wanna go home together when club activities are over?" he asked, coming forward.

Their clubs usually let out at the same time and they rode the same bus, so it was common for them to go home together. But it was the first time Ryoji had ever come all the way to the Art Room to invite Toru to go home together, so Toru hesitated momentarily.

He didn't understand why Ryoji had come all the way here to ask him that. Was this Ryoji's way of apologizing for what he had said earlier?

"If you can't, we could just do it tomorrow..." Ryoji said in an uncharacteristically timid voice.

Toru decided that Ryoji did want to apologize. He waved his hands in front of his chest. "No, it's okay."

"Really?" Ryoji finally smiled. "Then...will you stop by my house on the way home?"

"Huh?"

Ryoji's parents both worked, so they usually came home rather late. This spring, his older sister had left home to start college. So Ryoji was alone at home until pretty late in the evening. But Toru had never thought of Ryoji as someone who would be lonely by himself. But

maybe there were times when Ryoji became lonely but never said anything about it.

"I...guess so. But why?" Toru decided to ask.

Maybe Ryoji wanted to eat dinner together to apologize.

Ryoji lowered his eyes as if it was difficult to answer. After a while he finally looked up. "I want to do it with you."

Toru wasn't dumb enough to ask, "Do what?" Even though he was slow sometimes, he knew exactly what Ryoji was saying. "Stop joking around!"

Toru was so angry he could barely speak. He turned on his heel, but Ryoji's large hand stopped him.

"I'm not joking," Ryoji insisted. "I'm serious. I want to do it with you. I don't know why, but whenever I come, I always think of you. When I touch myself, or when I do it with my girlfriend, I only think of you. Isn't that weird? Don't you think that's weird?"

Toru thought it was less weird and more crude to confess to someone that you masturbate while imagining them. However, he was also guilty of secretly doing that, so he couldn't totally be angry with Ryoji.

"So I just want to try doing it with you for real," Ryoji admitted. "Not just in my imagination. I want to see if I can come with the real you."

"Are you making fun of me?" Toru smacked Ryoji's head.

"Ow! That hurts!" Ryoji yelped, holding his head.

"Serves you right!" Toru yelled. "Why should I do what you're asking? Sorry, but it's not going to happen."

"That's cold. I thought we were friends!" Ryoji complained irrationally. "Toru, do you hate me?"

Toru wanted to say, "I don't hate you, and that's the problem," but he couldn't. He was beginning to be unbelievably annoyed. Why did he love such an insensitive person? Ryoji wasn't thinking of Toru's feelings at all. He was a selfish man.

"Do friends normally want to screw each other?!" Toru asked, trying desperately to keep his voice calm. There was no way he could ever say the same thing to Ryoji.

"Is it that weird?" Ryoji asked.

"Of course it is!"

"But I want to do it!"

"You're thinking with your dick!"

"Why don't we do it?" Ryoji persisted without remorse. "I'm good, Toru. I'll be gentle, and I'll make you feel better than any woman ever could."

This time, Toru punched him mercilessly.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Of course it hurts! You idiot!" Toru yelled angrily.

"Why are you so mad? You're such a prude, Toru!"

"Who wouldn't be mad?"

"Why?" Ryoji's shoulders slumped.

Toru suddenly remembered what Tadashi told him earlier about it being normal for guys to do sexual things with each other.

"I wonder if it really does happen a lot," he murmured.

“What?” Ryoji asked.

“U-using another guy as your right hand.”

After the meaning of Toru’s words hit him, Ryoji said, “Yeah, it does. So just once, okay? I won’t hurt you. And if you don’t like it, we can stop,” he whispered in a very sweet, kind voice.

Toru felt his body trembling.

If what I feel for Ryoji is just normal confusion for my age, maybe if we actually have sex, I’ll snap out of it. Then my feelings will cool off and I might be able to calm down. But if I realize it’s a mistake, will I still have this painful feeling in my chest whenever I see Ryoji dating and sleeping with someone else? If my feelings for him stop, can I date a girl like normal?

“Just once, okay?” Toru agreed, lowering his eyes.

“Seriously?” Ryoji asked, surprised.

“I...won’t do anything to you, and we can stop if I don’t like it, right?”

“Okay. Definitely. It’s a promise, okay? Let’s pinky swear.” Ryoji grabbed Toru’s pinky, and after they sang, “Cross your heart and hope to die, stick a needle in your eye,” he smiled happily. “Okay, when club activities are over, I’ll come get you. Wait for me.”

“No, I’ll wait by the shoe lockers.”

“Okay. Even if I’m late, don’t go home without me, okay? We pinky swore, remember?” Ryoji said before darting off.

As Toru watched him, he already felt regret swelling up in his chest. He couldn’t help but feel he had

just made a mistake by making a promise with Ryoji.

He had agreed to it, but was it really something that could be decided so simply? Tadashi had warned him, too. But was Ryoji really serious?

What if Toru’s feelings didn’t cool off after they did it once? He knew that he would be miserable and cry.

Toru wasn’t sure if it was because his club activities let out early, but Ryoji was already changing his shoes by the lockers when Toru arrived.

They rode the bus for twenty minutes and, after getting off at the bus stop, walked another three minutes or so to Ryoji’s apartment, which was on the seventh floor of an eight-floor building. Toru had come over many times before, but he had never dreamt that one day he would be coming over to have sex. He started to feel faint. Along the way, they hadn’t spoken much and the air between them had felt heavy.

“Want to take a shower first?” Ryoji asked, as if he was used to this.

Toru wanted to cry. It looked as if he was the only one who was nervous about this.

“Toru? Don’t look so sad. Just relax and leave it to me. I won’t do anything mean, okay?” Ryoji rested his head against Toru’s and held him close.

Toru almost screamed out loud at this gesture, which was an illusion of being loved. He started to panic

and suddenly had the urge to run away. He knew that Ryoji didn't feel the same way as him. Toru wasn't the object of Ryoji's affection. But he still treated Toru so kindly. Ryoji treated him so tenderly, to the point where Toru could almost misinterpret his actions.

"A-are we really going to do this?" Toru couldn't help but ask.

"What? You promised!" Ryoji said hotly as he showed Toru to the bathroom. "Go ahead." He quickly left and closed the door behind him.

Toru stared at his reflection in the large mirror and he sighed. Was this really okay? The more he thought about it, the more confused he got. He was going to sleep with someone he loved, who didn't love him back.

He slowly took off his school uniform and noticed that the hot water had already been turned on from the control box in the kitchen. He smiled dryly and turned the shower on. "That was nice of him..."

Ryoji's popular not just because of his looks, but because he pays attention to details, too, he thought as the water from the shower poured over his head.

Just then, he saw a shadow emerge from the other side of the steam. He was so surprised he stopped breathing for a moment. He quickly went to turn off the shower, but Ryoji grabbed his wrist and stopped him.

"What are you doing?" Toru yelled.

"What's wrong?" Ryoji retorted. "It's a waste of time to take separate showers. Let's just take one together."

There's no way I'm taking one with him, Toru thought nervously.

He wasn't ready to face Ryoji just yet. No matter how much time he had, he just wasn't ready for that yet. He wasn't sure if he would ever be ready.

"What's wrong with you?" Ryoji said, pouting. "You're too cold. We're going to have sex, you know."

"You're completely tactless!" said Toru.

"Why? It's better for you to not have time to think about it," Ryoji pointed out. "If I leave you alone, you'll probably run away. If I let you wait in my room, you'll probably run off while I was taking a shower."

"No, I..." Toru couldn't deny that he hadn't thought about it. He had been thinking how to convince Ryoji to stop this foolishness.

"Let me wash you," Ryoji said as he lathered up a sponge.

"No, I can do it by myself."

But resistance was futile. He trembled at the sensation of Ryoji touching him. Ryoji didn't miss Toru's body stiffening as he started rubbing the sponge all over him, from his collarbone to his back, to his chest, to his stomach, and then...

"Hey! I'll wash there myself!" Toru protested as the sponge slipped down farther.

"No," Ryoji responded. "This is the body I'm going to make love to. Let me wash it."

"I said no! Idiot! Pervert!"

Ryoji bent over, ignoring Toru. Toru felt his body responding.

"Ooh, you're sensitive, huh?" Ryoji teased. "Should we do it here?" He threw the sponge aside and stretched his hand out to Toru.

"S-stop it! I'm not ready yet!"

"Looks like you are."

Ryoji held Toru from behind, his fingers moving on Toru's member. With just a few strokes, Toru was hard. But he didn't get to enjoy the feeling of being touched by the one he loved because of the panic engulfing him.

He clung to the bathroom wall, letting out hot puffs of breath. Cloudy liquid mixed with the water and flowed down the drain.

"Wasn't that a little fast?" Ryoji asked mischievously.

"It's because you..."

"Me? Was I good?"

"Idiot," Toru spat.

Ryoji brought his face closer to Toru's. "Aww...I didn't get to see your face when you came!" he said, disappointed. "But that's okay. We have plenty of time. Let's go to the bedroom."

Their faces were close enough to kiss, so Toru quickly looked away.

"What's wrong?" Ryoji prompted. "Let me kiss you."

"You're just giving me a hand job. Why do you need to kiss me?"

"Just a hand job? I never said that. I want to make love to you properly. I want to come inside of you," Ryoji said shamelessly.

Toru wondered once again if it was really okay to go forward with this. But he realized that it was too late to back out now. He probably felt that way because



Ryoji had done that to him in the shower. Ryoji grabbed his arm and wrapped him in a large bath towel, and quickly dragged him to the bedroom.

“Yaaay!” Ryoji said in a childish voice as he fell on the bed, still holding Toru in his arms.

“Ow!” Toru yelled as Ryoji forced him down on the mattress.

“Oh, sorry. Did that hurt? I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Forgive me, okay?”

As Toru grimaced from the pain on his shoulders and back, Ryoji took the opportunity to kiss him right on the lips.

“Hey!” Toru exclaimed afterwards, surprised.

Ryoji chuckled shyly. “That was our first kiss!”

Their next kiss was deep and passionate. Toru finally responded, but he didn’t know how to breathe while kissing. He didn’t know how to respond to the tongue that moved around inside his mouth. He choked from the excess saliva. Ryoji finally realized he was gasping for breath and ended the kiss.

“Hey, breathe through your nose,” Ryoji said with a sweet smile. Toru looked up at him with tears in his eyes. “You’re so cute...” Ryoji’s eyes narrowed kindly. He began kissing him again.

As they kissed again and again, Toru felt his ability to think being stolen away. He felt Ryoji’s fingers and lips travel down his body. He finally realized that the person he loved was touching him. Just thinking about that made him almost come right away. The only thing that prevented him from doing so was the fact that the person he loved didn’t love him back.

Ryoji had said he was good, and he hadn’t lied. He lit fires within Toru’s body. Toru’s chest welled up with jealousy as he realized that Ryoji’s experience easily trumped his own.

“Does it feel good?” Ryoji asked.

Toru nodded silently, fearing that his voice might sound suspicious if he answered.

“Really? Then let me hear your cute voice,” Ryoji said, and then suddenly took Toru inside his mouth.

“Ohhh...”

“Yeah. Like that.”

Toru covered his face with both hands as Ryoji licked and sucked on him. “N-no! Stop! Stop!” He struggled, but Ryoji held him down with all his might. “I said stop! Y-you said if I didn’t like it, we could stop! I want to stop! Let go!”

“Shut up or I’ll bite you,” Ryoji threatened.

Toru’s body stiffened.

“We’ve come this far,” Ryoji whined. “There’s no way I can stop now. It’ll be hard for you if we stop at this point, too. Don’t worry, just leave it to me.”

“This isn’t what we promised!” Toru objected.

Ryoji stopped for a moment. “Promised? Oh, that was just a promise that you wouldn’t run away. We pinky swore that you would let me do it and you wouldn’t run away.”

“You liar!” Toru screamed.

“It’s okay,” Ryoji whispered in a sweet voice, and resumed his actions. “Don’t be scared. I won’t do anything bad to you, okay? So just stay still. You don’t have to do anything today. Just stay still and I’ll do

everything.” His arms circled around Toru’s back and his fingers tried to enter Toru’s body.

“Stop! What are you doing?” Toru yelled.

“It’s okay. I’ll put it in right.”

Toru felt fear well up inside of him at Ryoji’s words. He shook his head. “No...”

Ryoji smiled as he wet his finger with some lubrication.

“What is that?” Toru asked tremulously.

“Unlike girls, you don’t get wet, so it might hurt,” Ryoji explained. “Sometimes even girls don’t get wet when it’s their first time. I’d feel bad, and it would also be rough for me.”

“Let’s stop, Ryoji. Please,” Toru pleaded. He liked Ryoji a lot, but he didn’t think he could go this far. He had imagined sex with someone he loved to be a happy thing, but this was different. Ryoji was only playing around with him, but Toru was serious. It was too pathetic. “I don’t want to. Let’s just stop.”

“Are you scared? It’s okay. I’ll get you used to it. I’ll go really, really slow. And after it gets wet, it won’t hurt anymore. Just relax your body.”

Ryoji inserted a finger, while still sucking Toru off. The lubrication helped the finger move easily enough.

“No...ahh...ohhhh...noo...”

Even though he wanted to refuse, Toru’s voice sounded like he was enjoying what was happening. His voice surprised him. Ryoji’s finger felt like it was melting into him, and his insides felt like mush. After what seemed like forever, he finally got used to it.

Ryoji let go of Toru’s member, stretched out, rubbed his body against Toru’s, and entered him.

“Ahhh!” Toru screamed.

“Does it hurt?” Ryoji asked immediately. “It shouldn’t hurt anymore...”

Ryoji was right, it didn’t hurt anymore, but Toru felt a tremendous amount of pressure inside his body.

Toru moaned. “I...don’t feel good.”

“Just hang on.”

“I can’t!” Toru complained.

Ryoji went in more deeply. “Just a little bit more...and I’ll get to the good part.”

“Ahhh!”

After he got into the position he wanted, Ryoji began to move inside Toru. He was panting by then. It was all Toru could do to keep up. He felt a throbbing sensation race down his spine and tears welled up in his eyes.

They had finally done it. It had been incredibly intense. The excitement in the air cooled down and the air between them felt heavy.

Without looking at Toru, who was dazedly laying face-down on the bed, Ryoji whispered, “That was different than how I thought it’d be...”

Toru couldn’t believe what he had just heard. It was like a bucket of cold water poured over his head. What did Ryoji mean? Ryoji had said that when he did

it with a girl, he thought of Toru when he came. Maybe he was disappointed after actually doing it with Toru. Maybe Toru hadn't been good?

How could he say something so cruel? Toru thought, tears welling up once again in his eyes. He couldn't believe it, but, at the same time, he knew that that was the reality of the situation—Ryoji just didn't love him. Toru gave up. He knew, from the beginning, that he and Ryoji didn't have the same feelings. He had never imagined Ryoji would propose something like this, and he would be lying if he said he hadn't hoped his own feelings would cool off after doing it.

But now he knew better. Even though Ryoji had basically forced Toru to have sex with him, and, even though he had said such a cruel thing to him, Toru still loved Ryoji. His feelings hadn't cooled off at all. Ryoji had touched him with his fingers and his lips, and those sensations still lingered on Toru's body.

Toru slowly got up and, without looking at Ryoji, whispered, "I'm going home." He didn't know what else to say. He felt that he didn't belong here.

Ryoji stared absentmindedly at Toru's back as he left. He started to reach his hand out, but hesitated. He couldn't say anything yet. Toru didn't notice anything as he put on his clothes and ran out of the room. Ryoji clicked his tongue at his failure to stop Toru.

The next day at school, Ryoji acted completely normal. After he had left Ryoji's apartment the night before, Toru had gone home and taken a bath and cried himself to sleep. So, he couldn't believe it when Ryoji came up to him and cheerfully said, "Morning!"

Toru thought hopelessly that it seemed Ryoji was satisfied with how things had turned out. Ryoji must have realized that the real thing was different from his imagination. They had only done it once, so apparently they would keep on living like nothing had ever happened between them.

As proof of that, Ryoji was laughing and talking as usual with Ayano that morning.

Toru grew depressed as he watched the two of them. The more he thought about the situation, the more he wanted to cry. He wished he could just hate Ryoji for what he did, but he knew he couldn't.

"Oops..." Toru realized had been biting his finger so hard that he had broken the skin. He quickly started to suck the blood off when Ryoji, who had parted with Ayano, came near him.

"What's wrong?" Ryoji asked kindly. "You're bleeding." He probably thought Toru had cut his lip. He put his hand on Toru's chin and peered at his face, but Toru automatically pulled away. "Did you bump into something?"

"No. I guess the blood from my finger got on my lips."

"That looks painful. Wait a second." Ryoji reached into his pocket and took out a bandage. "Hold out your hand." Toru timidly stretched out his hand,

and Ryoji wrapped the bandage around his finger. He smiled. "See? I fixed your boo-boo."

Toru burst out laughing at Ryoji's childish behavior. "You're like a little kid!"

Ryoji looked relieved to see Toru smile. Even though he was acting like everything was fine, Toru could now see that Ryoji had been worried about him. Toru couldn't be angry at him anymore.

It's better if we stay friends, he thought. Maybe his romantic feelings toward Ryoji would settle back into just friendly feelings. Maybe one day they would look back on the day before and laugh about it.

"Hey, Toru, did you do the English translation?"

"Oops, I forgot."

"Stupid. Sensei will call on you today for sure. I'll show you mine. Copy it down before class starts."

Toru wondered if this was Ryoji's way of apologizing to him. He decided to just accept his friend's good will.

Toru tried his hardest to forget about everything, and before he knew it, three days had passed. Of course, he was always thinking about Ryoji even though he knew it was useless. He didn't want to bring anything up again, though. But every single move Ryoji did made his heart pound. Every time Ryoji got called on in class or when anyone called his name, Toru felt nervous. Toru started to hate himself for being so caught up in this

hopeless situation. He knew he was the only one who felt that way. If Ryoji talked to him directly about the situation, how would he respond?

After school, while on his way to club activities, Toru stopped suddenly as Ryoji called out to him. "Toru! Hey!"

"What?" Toru asked, trying to sound casual even though his heart was pounding like crazy.

"I forgot that CD I said you could borrow," Ryoji replied. "Want to stop by my house on the way home to get it?"

"It's okay, just bring it tomorrow," Toru said.

"I don't think I'll remember. I might forget it again tomorrow. You wanted to listen to it, right?"

From the look on Ryoji's face, Toru knew that the CD wasn't the only thing he had on his mind. He didn't know what to do. He had been afraid that Ryoji would never invite him over again after what they had done. But Toru didn't want to go there for a while. What had happened was still fresh in his mind, and he knew he wouldn't be able to pretend that everything was fine.

"Don't you want to come over anymore?" Ryoji asked sadly.

"Um, it's not that..." Toru mumbled.

He was afraid that if he didn't go the situation would become worse. "Okay. I'll come over for the CD." He decided he would just wait in the foyer for the CD and then go home. "Thanks!" Ryoji gave an innocent, childlike smile and said, "See you later!"

Toru hadn't planned on taking his shoes off, so he stood in the foyer of Ryoji's apartment.

"What's wrong?" Ryoji asked suspiciously.

"What?"

"You're just standing there."

Toru shook his head. "It's nothing."

"Come on in."

"No, you can just go get the CD."

Toru tried his best not to sound cold, but Ryoji still scowled.

"Come in!" Ryoji said roughly.

"Ryoji..." Toru stepped back. Just as he did, Ryoji grabbed his arm. "Ryoji?"

Ryoji pulled him close and Toru stood there, bewildered. He hadn't thought Ryoji would force him inside. He knew he couldn't refuse at this point, so he reluctantly took off his shoes. When he looked down at them, he didn't see the shadow that hovered above him so he wasn't able to dodge Ryoji's embrace.

"Hey, what are you doing, Ryoji?"

Ryoji remained silent and just held Toru in his arms. Then he pulled Toru to the bedroom. It was only when they made eye contact that Toru realized that the CD was just an excuse to get him to come to Ryoji's bed again.

"Stop it! What are you thinking?"

"Let's do it, Toru," Ryoji said, pushing Toru to the bed, and straddling him and unbuttoning his school uniform.

Toru was taken aback. He started to flail, but he couldn't push Ryoji off of him. He had seen on TV that

this was the worst position to be in during a fight. He couldn't move because of the pressure on his abdomen and there was no way he could get free.

"Let go of me! Stop screwing around!"

"I'm not." Ryoji seemed to be telling the truth. The look in his eyes said he was very serious.

"Then what are you doing?" A cold chill ran down Toru's spine, and his body stiffened. "I thought you were disappointed because it was different from how you thought it'd be, so then why are you—?"

"Disappointed? What are you talking about?" Ryoji asked. "It was so much better than I thought it would be. It exceeded my imagination. After it happened, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," he added shamelessly.

Toru was unbelievably angry rather than happy at hearing those words. If that was true, then why had he cried himself to sleep that night? "Get off! You promised it would only be just one time! You pinky swore!"

Ryoji's teasing fingers sneaked behind Toru, and he thrust his finger inside Toru. "You're so warm inside, Toru."

"No! Ahh...oh..."

Ryoji took off Toru's pants and underwear, and held his legs up. Impatiently, he entered Toru. He wasn't going to wait until Toru's body was ready today. He groped around hurriedly, giving biting kisses. As Toru struggled, he watched his legs tremble helplessly in the air. It was like he was drowning, and, as he sighed in defeat, he could only cling to Ryoji's back. They had sex painfully.

Toru left the classroom during lunch saying he was going to go buy some bread. But, instead of going to the cafeteria, he trudged towards the Art Room instead. Ryoji was eating with Ayano in the cafeteria today. Things seemed to be going well between them.

Since that painful afternoon, Toru and Ryoji had had sex three more times. Ryoji would always force Toru to come to his house on the way home. Toru now felt that Ryoji knew every part of his body. He knew where to touch to make Toru moan, what Toru didn't like. They had even tried many different positions. Toru would always resist at first, but he would always eventually give in and open his body up to Ryoji.

Because no matter what happens, I still love him, Toru thought, sighing.

Luckily the door to the Art Room was unlocked and no one was there. Toru sat in a chair by the window and gazed out absently. The pool was closed for the season and the icy water looked muddy. Last summer, Toru had often come here to watch Ryoji swimming beautifully like a dolphin. Back then, he never would have imagined that things would end up like this. In just a few days, his and Ryoji's bodies had joined, but their hearts were still far apart.

"Is that you, Maiki?" a surprised voice called from the doorway. Toru turned around and saw Keigo standing there. "It's unusual to see you here at this time of the day."

"Hello," Toru greeted before turning his gaze back toward the window.

"What are you looking at?" Keigo asked from

behind him. "The pool? It looks cold outside, huh? It's about time to bring out the winter coats."

"Huh? Already?"

"I get cold easily. Have you already eaten lunch yet?"

Toru shrugged his shoulders vaguely.

"You're hopeless. What if your stomach growls during afternoon classes? Here." Keigo gave Toru a cream bun shaped like a conch from the paper bag in his hand.

"I'm fine, thanks," Toru replied. "Not hungry."

"You have to eat something," Keigo insisted. "Sorry this is all I have. I just bought sweets for a snack. What are you so worried about that you don't have an appetite?" he asked casually.

Toto silently unwrapped the cream bun. He picked off the narrow part of the bread and then put some of the custard cream from the larger part on it. The narrow part usually didn't have any cream in it, and there was always too much in the large part.

Keigo laughed. "I eat those the same way! I wish the cream was more uniform. Do you eat fish pastries from the tail first or the head first?"

"The tail," Toru said shyly. "But halfway through I eat the head, too."

Keigo laughed again. "Me, too."

As the two exchanged small talk, Toru began to feel better. Keigo didn't ask again about his worries, and time passed peacefully.

He was glad he had come to the Art Room. He didn't have to think about Ryoji. He didn't have to

wonder when Ryoji would come back, or what he was doing.

The bell rang, and Toru stood up saying, "I should go. See you after school!" He bowed his head.

"Hey, Maiki, are you worried about the art contest?"

"Oh, yeah...I have to do that."

"What, you forgot?" Keigo laughed as Toru playfully stuck his tongue out at him.

When Toru returned to the classroom, he saw that Ryoji had already come back.

"Where were you?" Ryoji demanded.

His voice sounded strange. Toru wondered why he seemed so angry after he had just eaten lunch with his girlfriend.

"Who cares?" Toru retorted carelessly.

"Were you eating lunch with someone else?" Ryoji pressed on.

"Why does it matter?" said Toru, a bit exasperated. "Go back to your seat."

"What's up with you?" Ryoji said. "You were late so I was worried. You said you were going to buy bread, so I thought you were just wandering around somewhere."

Toru thought that Tadashi must have told Ryoji about that, and he noted that Ryoji really did seem worried.

He still wouldn't go back to his seat, so Toru whispered, "It was too much of a pain to go to the cafeteria, so I just went to the Art Room. Club President let me have some of his lunch, so I'm full."

"Club President? You mean Kashiwazaki-san? He bought you lunch? Did you eat together?"

Toru was a little confused at how meddlesome Ryoji was being. Ryoji hated it when others butted into his affairs, so what was going on?

"You probably didn't eat enough. Here." Ryoji pushed a paper bag towards Toru.

"What's this?" Toru opened it up and saw an egg salad sandwich inside.

"You like those, right?"

"Yeah..." Toru answered, his eyes wide. He wasn't the only one who liked the sandwich. It was really popular, and if you didn't go to the cafeteria really early you wouldn't be able to buy one. He wondered if Ryoji had gone to the trouble of getting him one while he was out with Ayano.

As he stared at Ryoji in shock, the bell rang and the teacher came through the door. Ryoji quickly brought his lips close to Toru's ears and whispered provocatively, "Come home with me today."

Going home together meant only one thing. Toru felt his body grow warm, and then he felt flustered. He sighed as he clutched the paper bag in his hands. The last time they had had sex was the day before yesterday. He thought that the intervals were too short. The traces of their last encounter still lingered on his body. If they kept doing it this often, there was no way Toru could

forget his feelings. And Ryoji looked like someone who was obsessed with a new toy he had gotten. He would get tired of Toru eventually. What would Toru do then? Toru felt like crying just thinking about it.

Tadashi watched the exchange between his friends. The atmosphere between Toru and Ryoji seemed strange somehow. It wasn't the first time he had noticed it. He didn't want to interfere, but he felt that he had to do something today. If he didn't step in, something dangerous might happen.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Tadashi called to Toru after school.

Toru stopped and smiled. "What's wrong?"

"It might just be my imagination, but...are you guys doing something?"

Toru knew that "you guys" meant him and Ryoji. And "something" was...

Was it so obvious that Tadashi could tell just by looking at them? Toru felt sweat running down his back as he considered this. Had he done something to give it away?

"You don't have to be scared. I don't think anyone else has noticed," Tadashi reassured him, as if he had read Toru's mind.

"H-how?" Toru whispered in surprise.

"Well, I wasn't positive, but the atmosphere between you two seemed...suspicious."

Toru couldn't play dumb. His silence answered Tadashi's question.

"How did it happen?" Tadashi asked. "Ryoji is..."

"I know," Toru moaned. "But I couldn't help it. Before I knew what was happening, I couldn't run away."

Tadashi pulled him out into an empty hallway, and looked at him in a concerned way.

"Don't look at me like that!" said Toru. "I don't know what to do, either."

"Didn't I tell you?" Tadashi reminded him. "If you get carried away, you'll get hurt."

Toru looked down and whispered, "I know."

"No, you don't!" said Tadashi. "He's a beast. I can't believe he'd do that to his friend. I mean, if he loved you, I'd totally support you guys, but he..."

"I know," Toru repeated. "He's just doing this out of curiosity. He just wanted to try it out at first. But after the first time, he said it was better than he'd thought it would be, so..."

"Toru, why aren't you mad?" Tadashi asked angrily. "You need to be mad and seriously tell him to stop. If you avoid him then you can get out of this. If you had come to me first, I could've helped you! Why didn't you say anything?"

"I'm sorry," Toru whispered. "But I was so embarrassed...I couldn't."

"Well, you're slow sometimes so you just let yourself be persuaded by him. You're the dangerous one. I knew that if he demanded it, you wouldn't be able to say no. But this isn't good. Don't you think it's

worse because you love him? He has a good body, but his feelings aren't there."

As Tadashi finished his rant, Toru lifted up his face in amazement and his eyes widened. What had Tadashi just said? He knew that Toru had been hiding romantic feelings for Ryoji?

"Oops..." Tadashi said, but it was too late.

"You know, Tadashi?"

"Well, I..."

"I'm sorry I worried you," Toru said quickly. "But it's okay now."

He wasn't sure why it was okay, but he needed to run away from Tadashi's side.

He probably thinks I'm pathetic, Toru thought as he ran. He had been proud to be friends with Ryoji and Tadashi, but now he felt that he was going to lose both of them. His legs felt rubbery beneath him, but he kept running, even though he didn't know where to go.

Finally his legs brought him to the Art Room. Everyone was probably already gathered in there. He didn't think he could get anything accomplished in this state. Suddenly, he saw Keigo standing in front of the room. Keigo was about to lock the door. He turned around when he heard the sound of Toru's footsteps running towards him.

"Maiki. Club is cancelled today," he said, smiling. "One person was sick and went home early, and only three other members showed up, so I decided to cancel...Maiki?" Keigo looked concerned as he noticed that Toru looked strange. "What's wrong? You're white as a ghost!"

"Oh, nothing," said Toru. "I'll go home, then."

"Wait." Keigo unlocked the door, took Toru by the arm and led him inside. They sat down in some nearby chairs and he asked again, "What happened?"

"I..."

"It's okay. You can tell me. Or won't I be able to help?"

Toru shook his head. "No, it's not that."

"Is someone bullying you? Did you get in a fight?"

"No, but...I...if I tell you, you'll judge me."

"No, I won't," Keigo quickly replied.

Toru didn't know what to do. Then he figured if two people had already abandoned him, what was one more?

"Yes, you will!" he blurted out. "I had sex with one of my friends. It wasn't a girl, either. It...was a guy."

"Did he rape you?" Keigo said, putting a hand on Toru's arm. "It's okay, just calm down."

"No," Toru replied, "it wasn't rape."

"That's good then," Keigo said, not disgusted at all. "So what's the problem? As long as you love each other, it doesn't matter if you're the same sex."

Toru was relieved at Keigo's calmness. He felt that he could tell Keigo anything now.

"No," he revealed. "I love him a lot...but he doesn't feel the same way. He's just doing it out of curiosity."

"Did you tell him you love him?" Keigo asked.

Toru shook his head.

"No. He doesn't know how I feel. He was the one

who proposed to do it because he wanted to try it out.”

“Try it out?” Keigo repeated. “Wait, are you sure he doesn’t like you?”

“I’m sure,” Toru said firmly.

“Must be hard for you,” Keigo whispered solemnly.

Tears welled up in Toru’s eyes. It was. It was really painful. Having sex with someone you loved when they didn’t love you back was really painful.

It was as if his heart was crying out in pain.

“And you still love him?” Keigo asked gently.

Toru nodded, crying silently.

“Why don’t you try to tell him how you feel?” Keigo suggested. “Tell him you love him. He might surprise you.”

“I can’t...” Toru whispered. “I’d rather die than tell him that.”

“Poor thing...” Keigo murmured, stroking Toru’s hair. “But if you keep this up, it’ll just become more painful, you know.”

“I know,” Toru sobbed. “That’s why I want to stop, but I can’t turn him down when he asks me to. And my other friend found out...” And he related to Keigo what Tadashi had told him.

“Hmm...it sounds like you’ve gotten yourself into a difficult situation. He sounds pretty forceful. And really into you.”

Toru silently corrected him. He’s not into *me*, he’s into the newness of the pleasure he *gets* from me.

“Maiki, do you want to stop,” Keigo slowly said, “doing it with him?”



Toru nodded without hesitation.

"Even though you love him?" Keigo added.

"It's too painful having just a physical relationship with him," Toru said honestly.

"I guess so," Keigo said, sympathizing. "Hey." He peered at Toru. "Want to go out with me?"

"What?" Toru stared blankly at Keigo, not understanding the meaning of his words.

"Of course it will just be for pretend," Keigo said, patiently. "But to resist him, I think you need a really good reason. If it was a girl, you'd be in the same position as him, so it probably would be meaningless. Do you understand?"

Toru shook his head vaguely.

"He has a girlfriend but is still having sex with you, with no problem," Keigo explained further. "So if you start going out with a girl and say 'I have a girlfriend now, so we can't do it anymore,' he'd just say, 'I have a girlfriend, too, you know.'"

Toru nodded. Keigo was probably right.

Keigo continued. "But if you say 'I have a boyfriend and I don't want to do it with anyone else but him,' he probably wouldn't be able to say anything right? He'd probably be too surprised that you're going out with another guy. And since he had sex with you, it's not like he could be prejudiced about it. What do you think?"

Toru wasn't entirely convinced. He wasn't sure how Ryoji felt about gay relationships. That was why Toru had hidden his feelings for so long.

"Why don't we just go home for now?" Keigo

suggested. "Did you promise to go home with him today?"

"Yes."

"Then just stand him up," Keigo said with a smile on his face. "He might get angry about it, but that's when you can tell him you're going out with me now."

Toru found himself nodding. He felt bad for involving someone else in this, and also doubtful as to why he had confided in Keigo so much. But when he looked up and saw Keigo's cheerful face, he couldn't bring himself to say no.

Just as Keigo had told him to, he stood Ryoji up and went straight home. That night, Ryoji called him.

"Why did you go home early?" Ryoji demanded over the phone.

"Club activities were canceled," Toru tried to explain, but Ryoji wouldn't accept it. He had no choice but to continue with what Keigo had told him to do. "I won't sleep with you anymore."

The other end of the line went silent. After a while, Ryoji asked in a disturbed voice, "Why?"

"I...love someone," Toru said. Immediately, Ryoji's face appeared in his mind.

"Oh, that?" said Ryoji. "Who cares? I have a girlfriend, too, so we're in the same boat!"

Toru almost gasped. Keigo had been totally right.

"It's not the same," Toru replied.

"Huh?"

"It's different from your situation. The person I love is a guy. I started going out with the Art Club president, Kashiwazaki-san. So, I don't want to do

it with anyone else but him. I can't do it with you anymore." Toru was thankful he was doing this over the phone. If Ryoji could see his face, he would know that Toru was lying. Over the phone, Ryoji couldn't hear how bad Toru's voice was trembling, or that he was about to cry.

Toru prepared himself for a comment like, "Ew! You're a homo? I can't believe it! You're going out with a guy?" But Ryoji's reaction was different.

"I see..." Ryoji said. He sounded disappointed. "Well then, I guess we can't anymore."

Toru sighed with relief.

"Since when?" Ryoji asked a bit hesitantly. "Since when have you been going out with him?"

Toru hadn't expected Ryoji to ask more questions. He was at a loss for words. "Um...we started going out last week." There was no way he could say "Yesterday."

"Hmm. So you've liked him for a while?" It seemed Ryoji still wasn't convinced.

Toru closed his eyes and whispered, "Yeah, for a long time. I've loved him for a long time." His voice became unexpectedly intense. When he said those words, he was thinking of how he felt towards Ryoji, not Keigo.

Ryoji remained silent. Apparently the tone of Toru's voice had affected him.

"Ryoji?"

"Oh. Yeah. So you like him that much, huh? I was just surprised a little." Ryoji's voice sounded a little shaky now.

Toru was relieved, but he felt uneasy about hearing the sound of Ryoji's voice and about answering all of his questions. Of course there probably weren't many people who would immediately smile and give their blessing to their friend who had just come out to them. Even if they were having sex with that person for fun.

"What's so great about Kashiwazaki-san?" Ryoji asked after a while. "What do you like about him?"

Toru didn't know what to say for Ryoji to be satisfied. He thought of Keigo's face and then tried to think of his good points. "He's really kind and gentle, and he gives me a lot of advice. I can count on him when I need help. Since I'm so absentminded, he always takes care of me." As he spoke, he began to be confused of who he was talking about. It wasn't Keigo who took care of him when he was spacing out. It was Ryoji. He was the one Toru counted on. "And he always waits for me without getting irritated." That was Ryoji too.

The more he spoke, the more blurry the image of Keigo became in his mind, until it was replaced completely with Ryoji's face. This made Toru realize exactly how much he loved Ryoji, whether he liked it or not.

"Really?" Ryoji interrupted. "That's a different impression than I have of him. I think Kashiwazaki-san is good-looking, but he's kind of stuck up and eccentric. I never know what he's thinking about."

Indeed, Ryoji's description of Keigo was a lot more accurate. Was it just Toru's imagination or was there a sense of hostility in Ryoji's voice?

"No, he's not like that at all," Toru defended.

"Okay then," said Ryoji. "You don't have to gush about him. So? You told him you liked him and then he said he liked you too?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, I'm sorry for bringing you into a strange relationship. He seems kind of a prude, so it's better if he doesn't find out that you've slept with me." Ryoji spoke so quickly, it took a while for Toru to understand what he had said. "Don't worry, I won't tell. And you're not so used to doing it that he'd find out if you two do it. Hey...have you done it already?"

Toru couldn't answer such a straightforward question. Luckily the beeping sound of the phone broke the awkward silence.

"Oh, sorry. The other line's ringing. See you at school tomorrow," Ryoji said simply, and hung up.

Toru was relieved, but for some reason he wasn't completely satisfied. After he hung up the phone, he stared at the receiver. Was it really okay to leave things like this, even if the time he had spent with Ryoji was like sweet torture that would never come again? He should be happy, so why did he feel so sad, as if he would soon cry? No matter how he felt about Ryoji, he couldn't just confess to him. Besides, Toru was the one rejecting a purely physical relationship. Maybe he was the one who was being greedy for not accepting it. Maybe he should just have let it stay as a physical relationship. But, even as he thought about it, he knew he couldn't do that. And that was why he had no choice but to end that kind of relationship. It had to end.

He kept thinking to himself that it was for the best.

The phone call Ryoji received was from Tadashi.

"I'm in the neighborhood, so I'm coming over," Tadashi said and hung up without waiting for a reply.

Within five minutes the doorbell rang. As Ryoji unlocked the door, he thought how unusual it was for Tadashi to visit him. When Tadashi came in, he didn't have the usual goofy look on his face, but a very serious one.

"Hey, will you knock it off?" Tadashi said immediately. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"What are you talking about?" Ryoji asked.

Tadashi fumed. "Don't play dumb! Have you ever thought about Toru's feelings? He's just your toy in this game of curiosity!"

"Oh, you knew?" Ryoji asked, his shoulders relaxing. He was more concerned about the conversation he just had with Toru than Tadashi yelling at him. He wasn't sure why he was in so much shock. Was it just like Tadashi said? Was it because he had just had his toy taken away from him?

"Don't just stand there, say something!" Tadashi yelled.

"Don't worry, I won't sleep with Toru anymore," Ryoji replied.

"Huh?" Tadashi asked, dumbfounded.

"I just talked to him on the phone. He said we should end it."

"Toru did? He brought it up himself?"

I can't believe it, Tadashi thought. He didn't think Toru was that decisive. Besides, he knew Toru had feelings for Ryoji. It would be impossible for Toru to just let the relationship go.

"Yeah," Ryoji said with a sigh. "He said he's going out with the Art Club president, so he doesn't want to do it with me anymore."

Tadashi was shocked. "What? Toru said that? Seriously? Does he mean Kashiwazaki? He's going out with him? Why?"

"I have no idea. He said he has loved him for a while now. I wonder if he was thinking of him while we were doing it..."

This is ridiculous, Tadashi thought. Ryoji was the one Toru loved. There was no way he liked Keigo. He respected him as a senpai, but that was different from having romantic feelings. Maybe it was a lie Toru used as an excuse to run away from Ryoji? But Ryoji wasn't stupid, and he wasn't easy fooled, either. Anyway, Toru wasn't a very good liar. But how could this be true, that he was dating Keigo?

"Did Kashiwazaki-san ask Toru to go out with him?" Tadashi asked in amazement. Maybe Keigo had confessed his feelings to Toru, and Toru thought he had no other way out but to say yes.

"He said he told Kashiwazaki how he felt," Ryoji replied, "and then Kashiwazaki told him he felt the same way. So I guess it's a happy ending. I wonder if two guy-

can really love each other."

"Of course they can. They can have sex, too, right?" Tadashi said provokingly. But Ryoji didn't respond. All he did was bite his lips in frustration.

The next day was a rainy Saturday. Every other week, students had a half-day of school on Saturday. Toru went to school feeling as gloomy as the weather. He got off the bus and was about to open his umbrella when a large black umbrella opened over his head. He no longer felt the sensation of raindrops on his cheek, so he looked up. "Oh..."

"Good morning," Keigo greeted, with a smile.

"Good morning," Toru replied. "Do you usually take the bus?"

"No, I usually ride my bike, but it was raining pretty hard today so I took the bus," Keigo said casually, but Toru noticed that the bottom of his pants were fairly wet. He realized that Keigo must have been waiting here for him in the rain for a while now. Was Keigo worried about what they had talked about yesterday? Had he started to regret suggesting that they go out for pretend? Was that why he was waiting for Toru here?

"Let's go."

He and Keigo began walking the short distance to the school. At the school entrance, the different grades usually separated. The two entered through the door the third-year students used.

Keigo didn't say anything about what Toru was thinking. He also didn't seem worried.

"See ya!" he said, waving, and began to walk away.

"Bye..." Toru said in a somewhat dejected voice.

Keigo had been about to go inside when he suddenly came back, without opening his umbrella again. Toru quickly tried to open his own umbrella, but it stopped halfway and the two of them ended up soaking wet.

Perhaps he had noticed it when Toru had looked up, but Keigo said, "It's crooked," and fixed the tie on Toru's school uniform. Then he messed up Toru's hair, smiling, and turned around.

Toru finally managed to open his umbrella and started walking towards the second-year students' entrance. Keigo remained where he was, looking up at the school building. There was a slight smile on his face.

Toru hadn't noticed, but Ryoji had been watching him and Keigo from the window in their classroom. Ryoji hadn't gotten very good sleep the night before, and had woken up earlier than usual. He hadn't been sure what to do with himself, so he had just gone to school early. He had seen Toru and Keigo walking together so cheerfully, and realized that it had to be true that the two had started to date. But the more he thought about what Toru had told him on the phone, the harder it was for him to swallow. He had also endured Tadashi's lecture. Now he knew that he couldn't be involved with Toru anymore. The only choice he had left was to return to being just friends. Even though he knew that, he wasn't happy.

As he saw the intimate way Toru and Keigo parted, Ryoji felt an unpleasant feeling blossom inside him. And was it just his imagination or had Keigo looked up and smiled meaningfully at Ryoji? Ryoji wondered if his and Keigo's eyes had really met for a moment.

"No, there's no way that happened," Ryoji said to himself, shaking his head. "I'm thinking about it too much."

He figured Toru would probably be coming into the classroom soon. He decided he would talk to Toru just like he always did. He didn't want to hurt Toru any more than he already had.

Both Ryoji and Tadashi chattered away like normal. Toru also pretended that nothing was wrong, even though he felt awkward and hesitant inside. Finally the school day was over and, as they were preparing to go home, a girl's voice called out, "Maiki-kun, someone's here for you!"

Toru turned around and saw Keigo standing in the doorway. He felt both Tadashi and Ryoji turn around as well. He quickly ran to the door. "W-what's up?"

"I thought it would be more convincing this way," Keigo said in a low voice, smiling as he gazed into the classroom defiantly.

Toru guessed the intention of that look. He turned bright red. He felt terrible that someone he had dragged into this mess had such attention to detail. He wanted to

crawl into a hole and die.

"Are you free after this?" Keigo asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Then let's go to the planetarium," Keigo suggested. "It's raining, so won't it be a good change of pace? Even if they're artificial, when you look up at the stars, you feel better, right? It's not like you want to work on your art project now, right?"

Toru felt Ryoji staring as he and Keigo talked. If he turned Keigo down coldly, Ryoji would become suspicious.

"I'll go," he answered, and Keigo nodded and smiled happily.

Toru went back to gather up his things.

As soon as he reached his desk, Ryoji said, "Date?" with a blank look on his face.

Toru lowered his eyes. "Yeah," he said, nodding before leaving the classroom. *This will convince him even more, he thought. And now Ryoji will finally give up.*

The planetarium on a Saturday was fairly crowded. Keigo and Toru sat in the very back row of the seats next to the western sky. They settled into their comfortable seats and began to watch the program. Followed by the gentle voice of the narrator, stars began to appear in the sky.

Even though Keigo had invited him there so he

wouldn't be depressed, Toru wasn't able to get into what he was seeing. The only thing he saw in the starry sky was Ryoji's face. He knew he had to forget him, but after going through something so painful, Toru was tormented by memories that now seemed sweet.

He wasn't confident that he could continue being friends with Ryoji and Tadashi after all that had happened, and he wondered if they felt the same way. When he thought that he might lose a precious friend and the person he loved, he started weeping. A hand suddenly covered his eyes.

"Club...President? I can't see..." he whispered.

He felt Keigo's breath coming towards his lips. Then a soft warmth touched him. Toru stiffened. Keigo's lips were on his for only a second, but they left Toru frozen and quivering. He thought he and Keigo were "going out" as an act, for his sake? So then why did Keigo kiss him? Was he doing it out of curiosity, just like Ryoji? No, Keigo wasn't the type of person who would do that.

As he panicked and thought about all of that, the program ended. "Now, the eastern sky has brightened. A new morning has begun..." the narrator said, and the crowd around them started to stir. However, Toru didn't move. He was so scared he couldn't look at Keigo's face beside him.

"I'm sorry," Keigo whispered. "I didn't mean to make you panic. But I couldn't stand seeing you there crying silently. I just wanted to comfort you somehow."

"Club President..." Toru said slowly. "Do you..." He wasn't sure how he should ask his question. He

couldn't find the right words. Did Keigo have feelings for him? If so, Toru had asked Keigo to do a terrible thing for him. He hadn't considered Keigo's feelings at all.

"I shouldn't have done this with an ulterior motive," Keigo murmured with self-derision.

"I can't let you do this anymore," Toru whispered.

"I don't care if you're using me," said Keigo. "I won't ever do something like that again, I..."

Toru shook his head. "No, we can't. Because now that I know, I can't let you do this anymore. I know how hard it is to be with someone who doesn't love you back. I can't let you feel that way." He stared at Keigo, who remained silent. He saw a planetarium employee waiting for them to leave, so he quickly got up. "I'm sorry, Club President. I'm so stupid, I had no idea."

"Maiki," Keigo said, standing up as well.

"I'm sorry," Toru said, bowing his head deeply. He turned on his heel and ran outside into the rain, without opening his umbrella.

He knew it as soon as Keigo's lips touched his. The difference between a kiss of someone who loved you and someone who didn't. The difference between a kiss to someone you loved and someone you didn't. Now that he had that comparison, he knew.

Even if Ryoji didn't feel the same way, he loved him. He couldn't stop those feelings.

He got on a bus near the train station and tried to suppress the desire to get off at a stop near Ryoji's apartment. He wiped the foggy window with his hand



Two bus stops later, he saw a man outside, soaking wet. Toru suddenly stood up and got off at the next stop. He ran as fast as he could towards the place he had seen the man, who was now walking away from him. At the sound of Toru's feet splashing in the puddles of rain, the man turned around. It was Ryoji.

Why was he out here in the rain? And why was he coming not from the direction of the school, but from Toru's house? Had he gone there even though he knew Toru had gone out with Kashiwazaki? Or was it just a coincidence? Toru wanted to ask his questions, but he didn't. Before he knew it, he was in Ryoji's arms. They stood in the rain holding each other for a while, without saying anything. Then they walked back to Ryoji's house, holding hands.

Even when they got to the apartment entrance, even when they rode the elevator, they still didn't speak. They went inside and took a hot shower together, holding each other still.

Toru was the one who grabbed Ryoji's member this time. He opened himself to Ryoji. He was impulsively, recklessly searching for Ryoji, who was also yearning for him with intense lust. They made love deeply. Pangs of ecstasy raced through Toru's body.

Without speaking, they passed the time with reckless animalistic abandon.

When it was over, all that remained was their tired, listless bodies, the smoldering flames of their passion, and an unpleasant feeling of regret.

Ryoji stood up and Toru stared at his back. "Are you sure this is okay? What about Kashiwazaki-san?"

Ryoji whispered, not looking at him.

"I guess it's not," Toru said with a sigh.

Ryoji seemed about to say something but decided not to speak, and Toru decided not to press him any further.

Why did Toru renew this relationship that he had gone to so much trouble to end? That was probably what Ryoji wanted to ask him. But even if Ryoji asked him, Toru didn't have an answer. Toru's actions had gone against reason and logic. Before he knew it, he had been in Ryoji's arms and he had just lost himself to his instincts.

Of course, he knew it couldn't continue like this. Now it was probably over for good. But maybe he was the only one who thought that. They remained silent. Toru continued to stare at Ryoji's back in the dimly lit room as if he were boring a hole into it.

How many times had he looked at Ryoji's back like this? The first time...and many other times after that. Every time he stared at it thinking of the feelings he couldn't divulge, he wanted desperately to cling to Ryoji. But all he could do was just stare at his back. Even if he stretched out his hand to Ryoji now, his hand wouldn't reach Ryoji.

He painted blue on the white canvas.

Toru was completely focused on his art project now. He painted a shadowy, blue back. It was Ryoji's

back. The blue was the color of the water Ryoji swam in, the color of his bed sheets, the color of his curtains that fluttered in the breeze, and...

"That's the color of your desire, isn't it, Maiki?" Keigo said, peering from behind him.

Toru couldn't believe that Keigo had said such a thing. "What?"

"So you finally felt like working on your project, huh?" Keigo smiled gently, as if nothing had happened between them.

"Club President, I..."

"I like it. It's like your heart is reflected on the canvas."

"My heart?" Toru mumbled, shaking his head. "I didn't mean for it to..."

"Really?" Keigo eyes narrowed as he looked at the canvas again. "It's almost like a flame. You know, they say that the hottest part of a flame isn't the red part, but the blue part. You're the same way. Your flame is hotter than you think." It seemed Keigo had guessed whose back it was. "Do you still love him?" he asked quietly, and Toru looked up at him slowly. "If you do, you need to tell him. Do you think you can keep being friends with him when things are so unsettled? In five years? In ten years?"

Toru felt his chest tighten. He couldn't think of a good reply. His lips trembled.

"This painting is your heart, Toru. If he saw it, he'd know, too," Keigo said, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder before leaving. The warmth of his fingertips seemed to warm Toru's heart, too.

His relationship with Ryoji had ended that rainy day. And just as Keigo had said, their friendship had continued, but things felt unsettled. They joked around and smiled at each other, but it just felt superficial.

Ryoji hadn't invited him over again. And Tadashi hadn't mentioned anything more about the weird relationship between the two. Toru used working on his art project as an excuse to hang around the Art Room during lunch and after school. Keigo was kind to him as usual, but never crossed the boundary of being just a senpai.

Toru stared at the blue back before him. "My flame..."

Ryoji had set his body on fire. His fingertips had woken a flame that slumbered within Toru's body. "This is kind of deviant..." he whispered to himself with a dry smile, and continued painting with a different shade of blue.

Suddenly his surrounding, which should have been cold, turned warmer. He couldn't give up on Ryoji. The fire still burned within his chest.

Toru named the painting "Desire."

At the beginning of December, things got very busy around Toru.

After the final exams, when Ryoji was about to go to his club, Toru suddenly said, "Hey, will you come to the Community Center with me?" Ryoji just looked

surprised, so Toru continued. "After your club activity is over, of course. I'll wait for you."

Ryoji tilted his head. "No, it's okay," he said with a carefree smile. "We can go now. In the winter, all we do in the swimming club is go to a bunch of meetings anyway. It won't matter if I skip one meeting."

Toru felt pain race through his chest. Ryoji had somehow misunderstood everything. He thought he was the bad guy, so he treated Toru differently now. Lately he had been putting Toru first in everything, and Toru hadn't seen him with Ayano recently. But, just for today, he would let Ryoji pamper him.

The two of them started to walk towards the Community Center.

Toru's painting had won an honorable mention, much to his embarrassment. He'd found out at the Art Club's awards ceremony.

Until now, he had never really liked showing any of his paintings to his friends. He found it difficult to ask someone to go all the way to the exhibit with him just to see his work.

But, this time, he wanted to show his work to Ryoji no matter what. He knew there was no reason to shake their relationship by confessing his feelings, but it would be cowardly of him if he didn't tell the truth at this point.

Sometimes Ryoji would still ask, "How are things going with Kashiwazaki-san?" looking like he was genuinely worried about them. Toru hadn't told Ryoji that there was nothing going on between him and Keigo.

Toru decided he would tell Ryoji everything. He had also prepared himself to part with Ryoji afterwards. He couldn't pretend to be the victim anymore.

Since it was a weekday, there weren't many people at the Center, and the floor where the paintings were exhibited was empty. Since he had been there before with the Art Club, Toru headed straight for his painting. Ryoji looked all around as he followed.

"It's pretty unusual for you to show me one of your paintings," Ryoji murmured. "Even at the school's festival, you would always get mad and tell me not to look."

"I don't usually like anyone to see them, but this time it's different," Toru admitted.

"Huh?" Ryoji looked suspicious, but didn't ask any more questions.

Toru stopped in front of the blue-colored painting.

Ryoji whistled. "Is this it? Wow, it's great."

He probably didn't realize that the back in the painting was his own.

"It's you," Toru whispered, peeking at Ryoji's face.

"What? Huh? That's me?" Ryoji looked back and forth between the painting and Toru, his eyes wide. Then he looked at the title of the painting that hung below it, "Desire."

"That's the kind of image I have of you...it's...how I feel about you, Ryoji," Toru finally confessed.

Ryoji seemed flustered. "But...it's called 'Desire'. What does that mean?" he asked, looking down at Toru.

"It's my desire," Toru answered. "I...I love you, Ryoji. I've loved you for a long time now. My feelings went beyond friendship a long, long time ago."

Ryoji's mouth hung wide open. His face looked as if he had no idea what Toru had just said. At that dumbfounded look on his face, Toru couldn't help but burst out laughing. He was doing his best to confess his true feelings to Ryoji, but what a ridiculous face Ryoji was making!

"Wait a second, I thought you and Kashiwazaki-san—"

"That was a lie," Toru admitted. "I didn't like having sex with you, so we just pretended to be dating."

Ryoji's expression changed. He looked like he felt sorry for what he had done, since Toru disliked it so much.

Toru continued. "I...I love you, so it was too painful to have sex with you when I knew you didn't love me back. I was so sad I felt like I was going to die."

As soon as he heard this, Ryoji demanded, "Why didn't you tell me back then?"

"Even if I did, I thought you wouldn't understand," Toru explained. "I thought you'd be disgusted with me and we wouldn't be friends anymore. I was scared that you wouldn't like me anymore."

Ryoji bit his lip in frustration. It seemed Toru's assumption wasn't too far off. Maybe Ryoji really wouldn't have accepted Toru if Toru had told him the truth back then.

"But I won't lie to you anymore," Toru said firmly.

"I knew I had to tell you so we could settle this. We can't stay in that same place forever. If we don't break up properly, I don't think I'd be able to love someone again." He tried to keep the tone of his voice light. Of course, he wasn't thinking about loving someone else just yet. "So don't worry about it, Ryoji. Don't think that you did something terrible to me. That time was really painful for me, but now I feel that it might have been a good thing. Even if you did it out of curiosity, I was able to have sex with someone I love and—"

Ryoji interrupted him in a low voice, saying, "It wasn't out of curiosity."

"What?"

"I said it wasn't out of curiosity!" Ryoji said as he gazed at the painting. He slowly looked at Toru again. "It was at first, I won't deny that. I had imagined what your face looked like when you came, and I wanted to see what it looked like in real life. And when it was even better than what I had imagined, I couldn't let you go. You started to become more precious, more important to me."

"Ryoji?"

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. I think about you now, too. I wonder if I'll be happy just being friends, and I've been putting up with it until now, but...I keep thinking that as soon as I get the chance, I'll steal you away from Kashiwazaki-san. I've been thinking of ways to do just that."

At this unbelievable confession, it was Toru's turn to be flustered. "What are you saying? But you have a girlfriend."

"I broke up with her a long time ago. It was already over on that rainy day."

"What?" Toru's lips trembled. He didn't need to ask which rainy day Ryoji was talking about. He hadn't seen them together lately because they had already broken up? And he was the reason why? What was Ryoji talking about? Was he saying he loved Toru? And not out of curiosity, or because he was like a new toy?

"I can't get hard with anyone else but you," Ryoji whispered hotly.

Toru blinked. Tears dripped down from his long eyelashes.

"That's...deviant."

Ryoji nodded and laughed, saying, "Yeah, it is."

"I thought I was the only deviant one," Toru said, his voice trembling. Ryoji pulled Toru towards him and held him close.

Dangerously Bad

Even now, Toru Maiki would sometimes wonder if he was dreaming.

His romantic relationship with Ryoji Nakajo had started out so unexpectedly, and had grown from curiosity into love just recently. Whenever they made love, and he would feel Ryoji's hot breath on his trembling body, he would think maybe it was all just a dream.

They made love again and again, and kissed, and touched and Ryoji melted inside of him. Those days were so happy, he couldn't help but wonder if he was just in a long, wonderful dream.

The days when all Toru did was cry felt like a lie. Which one was a lie, the present or the past? He would always stop when his thoughts strayed in that depressing direction.

"Mmm..."

Feeling someone's gaze on him, Toru opened his eyes. He saw Ryoji looking at him and his body stiffened. "You scared me! Did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah," said Ryoji, smiling. "You looked so comfortable."

"You should have woken me up!" Toru said in an annoyed voice.

But Ryoji didn't seem to mind. He continued to

smile. "But your face looks so adorable when you're sleeping! I was going to wake you up, but you looked so cute I just wanted to look at you a little bit longer. You woke up on your own."

Toru wished Ryoji wouldn't call him adorable all the time. Ever since they confessed their feelings for each other, Ryoji called him that all the time. He would tell Toru his face was cute when he came, that his lips were delicious and Ryoji wanted to kiss him, that his cheeks were so soft Ryoji wanted to touch them. Toru was embarrassed to say things like that, but Ryoji had no problem saying them.

"But I'm glad you're up now," Ryoji added. "If you had slept for five more minutes, I think I would have jacked off to that pretty face of yours."

"Wha—" Toru was speechless. They had just had sex and Ryoji was going to jack off to his sleeping face already? But when he thought about it, Ryoji definitely could do it. "You haven't had enough?"

Ryoji pretended to ponder his question. "Hmm? Let's see..."

Toru thought their last sex session had been pretty intense, but if Ryoji still wasn't satisfied, then Toru felt that it was his fault. After all, Ryoji was the guy who had told Toru he got horny just by looking at Toru, and had asked him to have sex with him as a sort of test. Then, three days later, Ryoji had told him their first time had gone beyond his expectations, and had had sex with him again.

Toru felt that their lovemaking now had become deeper. But Ryoji's lust hadn't changed much. He

always surprised Toru with his toughness and stamina. He wanted Toru, and Toru was finally able to answer him back. Sometimes, though, Toru had a hard time keeping up with Ryoji.

Even today, Toru had probably passed out rather than fallen asleep. He had been trying his best, but Ryoji never seemed satisfied. He was still a little shocked by this fact.

"It's not that it's not enough..." Ryoji explained. "But when I look at you, I want you more and more. No matter how many times we have sex, it's just never enough. I wonder why. Hey...can I touch you some more?"

Toru nodded, a little confused. "Are you sure touching is enough? Should I suck on you?"

"I'd like that, but just wait," Ryoji said as he touched Toru's body. "I want to do all the touching and the licking right now."

Toru got goosebumps as Ryoji gently stroked his member. "That feels so good. It makes me feel so safe..." he whispered as Ryoji's lips touched his neck. The lips traveled down and sucked on his nipples. "Mmm..." he moaned, and then quickly covered his mouth.

Ryoji reached up and pulled his hands away. "Let me hear you. It makes me more excited. I like it."

"N-no..."

"Why not? You're so adorable, Toru. Don't you love me?" Ryoji knew how Toru felt, but at times like this he always wanted to hear Toru say it. "Tell me, Toru."

"I love you. I love you so mu—mmm..." Toru

trailed off as they entered round two. Even though he was exhausted, he was happy that Ryoji wanted him so badly.

"I love you too," Ryoji moaned. "This, this...all of this belongs to me. Toru, can I go inside you again?"

Toru nodded.

Without hesitation, Ryoji plunged himself inside Toru.

"Ahhh!"

No matter how many times they did it, Toru just couldn't get used to the pressure he felt when Ryoji entered him. Even though Ryoji would diligently try to get him used to it, and even though there wasn't much pain anymore, he still felt a sharp feeling race through him.

"That feels so good. It's the best..." Ryoji indulged himself in Toru, without tiring of it. Toru thought, *This time I really will pass out...*

Toru fell in love with Ryoji first. But since they were the same sex, and Ryoji was dating a girl, he thought he couldn't possibly tell Ryoji how he felt. Ryoji was just curious at first, but he soon grew serious about Toru. When Toru thought of how attached Ryoji had grown to him lately, he was happy, but also a little uneasy. He wondered if Ryoji would always be satisfied with him and never tire of him.

"Toru, didn't you get enough sleep?"

Toru opened his eyes wide with surprise and saw Tadashi Yamauchi looking at him. Tadashi, Toru, and Ryoji were best friends since the freshman year of high school. They were always together. Tadashi had picked up on Toru's feelings for Ryoji before Ryoji himself had, and he was fully aware of Toru's and Ryoji's current relationship.

Ryoji and Tadashi were both outgoing guys, who were great at sports and got good grades. Toru was introverted and got average grades. All three got along so well because Toru's presence was strangely calming to the other two, and they felt comfortable around him.

Ryoji had a straightforward personality. He was sometimes selfish, but he was always kind. Tadashi was observant and the cheerful mood maker of the group. The two of them were irreplaceable to Toru.

"Class is over," Tadashi continued. "Want to go to the gym during lunch? Ryoji already went to the cafeteria."

"Hmm?" Toru mumbled. "Oh, sorry, I was spacing out. Oh, crap..." He looked down at his notebook and saw that in the middle of his notes, his handwriting had started to get sloppier and sloppier until it stopped.

"You fell asleep!" Tadashi laughed as he looked at Toru's notebook as well.

"It's not funny! What should I do? We have to turn in our notes this week!"

"I'll let you see mine later. Come on, let's go. Did you bring your lunch today?"

"Yeah." Toru nodded and straightened up his desk as he grabbed his lunch box.

As they walked to the gym, Toru noticed that Tadashi kept glancing at him.

"What?" Toru asked.

"Are you okay?" Tadashi shot back.

"Huh?"

"If it's nothing, then never mind," Tadashi replied. "I was just wondering if you were feeling okay. You seem worried about something."

"What?" Toru's heart pounded. He did feel really tired. He knew it was because of what he and Ryoji had done the day before, but he couldn't tell Tadashi that. "Oh, I-I'm fine. I'm totally fine!" he said in a forcibly cheerful voice.

Tadashi shrugged. "Okay, then."

They entered the gym. The rays of sunlight that shone through the skylights were warm. It was still cold outside, but spring was definitely in the air.

"This is a sunny spot, huh?" Tadashi commented.

Even though it was really warm in the gym, students didn't usually go there. It was close to the third-year students' classrooms, so the freshmen were reluctant to go there, and the second-years thought it was too far away to bother with.

Toru and his friends usually ate lunch on the roof, but during cold weather they would eat in the classroom. But in the third semester, the third-year students' attendance was optional and the gym would be free, so sometimes the three friends would eat there for a change of pace. "It's so warm it makes me sleepy," Toru mumbled.

"Doesn't it?" said Tadashi. "We can start eatin

lunch on the roof sometime next week."

"What?" Toru exclaimed. "It'll still be cold then."

They both sat on the floor and leaned against the wall next to each other. After Toru opened his lunch box, he saw Ryoji coming towards them.

"Man, this is like a sunroom!" Ryoji said as he plopped down next to Toru. "Ohh, that looks good, Toru. Let me have a bite! Of that and that!" He pointed to various things in Toru's lunch box.

"No way," said Toru. "There's only enough for me!" But, even though he always said no, in the end he always let Ryoji have some of his food.

"Then just half!" Ryoji compromised. "Okay? Let's split it, and then I'll give you half of this egg-salad sandwich."

"No way, they still had them? You must've gotten there fast!" Toru said delightedly, taking the sandwich. The egg-salad sandwich was popular at the cafeteria, and one of Toru's favorites. If you didn't get in line fast, you wouldn't be able to buy one because they would be sold out. Toru had never tried to get one himself, but sometimes Ryoji would go and buy one for him. He began munching on it, saying, "Ohh, this is so good."

Ryoji nodded, satisfied. He reached over to Toru's lunch box as well. "Toru, you can eat all of that."

"Really? But then what will you eat?"

"I bought something else," Ryoji said, rummaging in the plastic bag he carried. He took out some bread.

"Okay, then! Lucky!" Toru exclaimed, finishing off the sandwich.

Tadashi watched this exchange silently, as he always did. He was already used to the kind of relationship the two had. Ryoji would often touch Toru in front of him with no second thought. Of course, Ryoji never did anything too intimate, but sometimes he would stroke Toru's hair or put an arm around his shoulders. This would embarrass Toru so much that he would feel like running away. But even if he told Ryoji to stop, Ryoji never listened.

And not only that, but even Tadashi would say, "It doesn't bother me, go ahead," so it was hopeless.

A girl from their class suddenly entered the gym. "Oh, here you are, Maiki-kun! Shimura-sensei wants to see you. You're the only one that hasn't turned in the biology report."

"Oh, I forgot." Toru quickly packed up his lunch box.

"I've been looking all over for you! Why'd you come all the way here just to eat lunch?" the girl asked, annoyed. She turned around. "I'm going ahead without you."

Toru stood up to follow her.

"Are you done with your report? I can help you," Ryoji said.

"No, it's okay. I just forgot to turn it in this morning. See ya!" Toru waved and then ran off. He often made honest mistakes like this. He would forget to turn in his notes or forget his gym clothes at home. He had always been pretty absentminded, but lately his condition seemed to have gotten worse.

"Maiki-kun."

Toru jumped at the girl's voice. He'd thought she had gone on ahead.

"What?" he stuttered.

"Sorry, did I startle you? I wanted to ask you something."

Toru wondered what it was as they walked side by side down the hallway.

The girl said hesitantly, "Um...is Nakajo-kun going out with anyone right now?"

"What?"

"I-it's not me, someone asked me to find out!" the girl rambled on quickly, as if she were embarrassed. "I used to see a freshman coming to the classroom all the time for him, but I haven't seen her lately. I heard a rumor that they broke up, and that he's free now...but it just doesn't seem like he is..."

Toru doubted that someone else had asked her to find out. "What do you mean, it doesn't seem like he is?"

The girl wrinkled her forehead in thought. "I don't know how to explain it, but it just seems like he's satisfied, and he just looks so peaceful lately. It's like things are going well with his current girlfriend."

Toru nodded. Maybe he was too close to the situation, but he hadn't noticed that change in Ryoji. Was what she said true? Was Ryoji really satisfied with Toru? Toru wasn't completely convinced, but he felt happiness well up inside of him.

"So what do you think?" the girl prompted. "You know, right?"

There was no way Toru could say, "I'm the one

he's dating," so he wasn't sure how to answer. "I'm sorry, I don't," he finally mumbled.

"No way!" the girl exclaimed. "But you guys are friends! Don't hide it, just tell me!"

"I really don't know. I'm sorry, okay?"

"I guess I just have to ask him myself," the girl murmured, sighing and giving up on asking Toru. "Well, see ya." She ran off.

Toru stared blankly after her as he watched her skirt flutter as she moved.

After Toru left the gym, a strange mood hung in the air between Tadashi and Ryoji.

"So what do you think?" said Tadashi.

"Think about what?" Ryoji asked.

"Toru," Tadashi replied. "Don't you think he's even more spacey than usual lately?"

Ryoji considered this. "Really? But he's always like that. That's what makes him so adorable. It's like...it just makes you want to save him all the time."

"Yeah, yeah, you don't have to gush about him," Tadashi said with a grimace.

"Then don't ask me!" Ryoji said, his lips tightening.

"Just...don't push him, okay?" Tadashi advised.

"What?" Ryoji exclaimed.

"I don't want to butt into your love life," Tadashi said quickly, "but I can't stand watching this. He's

always pale and dozing off in class. He always forgets things, and he seems worried about something."

"Toru does?"

Tadashi glared at Ryoji. "Don't play dumb. You know what I'm talking about. Do you think you can solve everything with an egg-salad sandwich? If you're trying to make up for what you did before, I think you need to go a little further than that. Toru falls for that crap too easily."

"That's not what I'm trying to do," Ryoji said, offended.

"Well, Toru is totally in love with you, so of course he won't complain," Tadashi pointed out. "But you're just doing whatever you want. If he's still as important to you as he was before, then think about his feelings. He's pushing himself. And I don't have to explain to you what I mean, right?"

Ryoji stood up. "Butt out. If I had a horse, I'd make him kick you."

"Why don't you ever listen to your friend's advice?" Tadashi complained.

The two glared at each other, then turned away and walked off in different directions.

Ryoji headed back to the classroom, muttering, "Who does he think he is, anyway? He always thinks he's so much better than everyone else!" He kicked the wall angrily. That wasn't the first time Tadashi had said harsh things to him, but this time it pissed him off because he couldn't deny it. "I know Toru's been pale lately. I know him better than anyone! God, he just needs to shut the hell up!" He suddenly stopped.

He had been terrible to Toru. He had forced Toru to have sex with him so many times without considering Toru's feelings. Of course he didn't think Toru disliked doing it. But sometimes Toru kept his emotions bottled up inside. So, even though Ryoji thought Toru didn't have a problem with doing it, maybe Toru was just bearing with it for Ryoji's sake?

"I just don't know..." Ryoji muttered. How could he know unless Toru himself told him?

Toru had once put up with Ryoji's selfishness until Ryoji had pushed him to his limits. Ryoji remembered how Toru had tried to stop their relationship by lying and saying he was dating the Art Club president, Kashiwazaki-san.

Even as Ryoji worried about it, he thought it might already be too late. If Toru wanted to break up again, that would mean he had lost patience with Ryoji. Just thinking about that made tears well up in Ryoji's eyes. Toru was so precious to him. He loved him so much. He had never felt this way towards any girl he had ever dated before. Those girls had told him they loved him so Ryoji would start dating them, but they never moved Ryoji's heart like Toru did.

Toru fell in love with Ryoji first. But now Ryoji wondered if maybe he was the one having the one-sided love. When they weren't touching, he felt uneasy, and, no matter how many times they made love, it never felt like it was enough. That was why he wanted to make love to Toru every day, and if he could, he wanted to be with Toru twenty-four hours a day.

Did Toru think Ryoji was a burden?

Not emotionally, but was Ryoji weighing him down physically?

"I need to fix this," Ryoji whispered. If he didn't do something, things might become unstable between them. For the time being, he decided to stop asking Toru to have sex with him every day.

"Sorry, Toru, but I'm hanging out with the guys from swim club today," Ryoji told Toru as school ended for the day, waving his hands in front of his face. "Go on home without me. I haven't hung out with them in a while, so they won't leave me alone."

In the winter, the swim club focused on strength-training, just as the track club did. They swam in the heated pool at the Community Center once a week, but Ryoji would occasionally skip out on practice.

Toru was in the Art Club, and there weren't any upcoming exhibitions so members were allowed to do free activities. Therefore, Ryoji had convinced Toru to skip out on activities many times lately. And even when they did go to their respective clubs, they would always wait for each other and go home together.

Toru nodded. "That's okay. Well, I'm going now."

Ryoji looked like he wanted to say something but instead said, "I'll call you tonight," waved, and left the classroom. Toru watched him leave and then set off towards the Art Room.

It had been a long time since they had gone home separately. He felt strange, sad and unsettled. *Oh well*, he thought, and hurried down the hallway. He knocked on the Art Room door and opened it, and all the students inside turned around and looked at him.

A few freshmen greeted him. They had their sketch pads in their hands and seemed to have been in the middle of a conversation.

"Oh, Maiki-senpai!"

"Hi!"

Toru noted they all looked rather bored as he greeted them back. "Hi, guys."

He headed towards his usual seat, and was about to continue working on his current project when a cheerful voice said, "Ohh, lots of people here today!" It was the former club president, Keigo Kashiwazaki.

The freshman girls let out squeals of delight, while the freshman boys stood up, their eyes sparkling.

"Kashiwazaki-senpai, I...um, I want to show you my painting," one of the boys, Daisuke Ishihara said.

Keigo glanced at Toru and shrugged. He reluctantly looked at Ishihara's sketchbook.

"Pretty good," he commented. "I think this is a really interesting motif."

"Really?" Ishihara exclaimed. "Wow, thanks! And also..."

"Oh, sorry, wait a second," Keigo interrupted the blushing Ishihara as he headed straight for Toru.

Keigo had a reputation for having a beautiful face, but he was actually pretty masculine. He was dependable and Toru had asked him for advice many times before.

The last time had been just before Toru had found out how Keigo felt about him.

If it hadn't been for Ryoji, Toru probably never would have realized Keigo's feelings. When he had been having just a physical relationship with Ryoji, it had been so painful that he had wanted to break it up. Keigo had suggested pretending that the two of them were dating. He had convinced Toru that it would be a good excuse. Toru had accepted, but had soon found out that Keigo wasn't doing it purely out of consideration for his junior—he truly had sincere feelings for Toru. Toru had stopped their pretend relationship immediately. If that event hadn't happened, Toru would have graduated without knowing Keigo's feelings.

Toru still liked Keigo a lot, and he respected him as a club president and a fellow artist. But, at the same time, he still felt bad at the way things had turned out. He had thought Keigo might act differently around him afterwards, but Keigo didn't.

"Unusual to see you here, Maiki," Keigo greeted, proving that he was still the same kind and thoughtful senpai.

"You, too, Club President. I thought third-years had optional attendance for the third semester?"

"There's nothing to do at home, so I come here a lot after school. You just haven't been coming lately, so that's why we haven't seen each other."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Toru bowed quickly, realizing that Keigo had found out that he had been skipping out on club activities.

Keigo chuckled. "What's wrong? Did something

happen with him?" he asked, lowering his voice and whispering in Toru's ear.

Toru looked at him, flustered. "Not really. I just thought, oh crap, we both haven't been going to club activities recently."

Keigo nodded. "Are you walking home together today?"

Toru shook his head. "No, we're going home separately today."

"Lucky! Then will you go somewhere with me?" Keigo smiled and took a piece of paper out of his pocket. He held it out and Toru reflexively took it. It was an admission ticket to an art exhibit.

"Um..."

"Will you come with me?" Keigo asked. "It's okay every now and then, right? Don't worry, I don't have any ulterior motives this time."

"Club President..."

"*Former* Club President. Let's go, okay? You don't have any projects you have to finish, right?"

Toru's personality didn't allow him to say no. He thought it was setting a bad example to the freshmen to leave early, but he gathered up his belongings anyway.

"Sorry, but I'm leaving for today," Keigo cordially called out to the rest of the group.

"What? But you just got here!" Ishihara exclaimed. "I wanted you to teach me things today!"

"I'm sorry," Keigo said amiably. "But what you just showed me is really good. I think, instead of listening to my advice, you should keep doing what you've been doing with it. Once it's done, show it to me again, okay?"

Ishihara's shoulders drooped dejectedly. *He must be really fond of Keigo*, Toru thought. He saw Ishihara glaring at him, as if the boy was angry at him for taking Keigo away.

"Well, see you later." Keigo waved and left the classroom, oblivious to Ishihara's reaction.

Toru couldn't bear to stay there any longer so he quickly followed after Keigo. "Are you sure it's okay?" he asked.

"Huh?" Keigo turned and looked at Toru.

"Ishihara looked like he wanted to talk to you some more."

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine," Keigo said mildly, as if the issue was unimportant.

"But..."

"I've been spending all my time here the past two or three days. He always does what I tell him to do. I try to give him vague advice so I don't influence him too much, but he just keeps on asking. If I don't leave him alone, he'll never grow as an artist and he won't have any individuality left."

Ohh, I see, Toru thought, and nodded. He could understand what Keigo was saying.

"I'm sorry," Keigo suddenly apologized. Toru tilted his head, confused. He thought Keigo was still talking about Ishihara, but it seemed Keigo had something else on mind. "I'm sorry I made you come with me today. But do you think you could be with me a little longer? I promise I won't do anything bad."

"Club President..."

"I want to make some memories or something. I

just want to walk around with you for a while. But he's always around you, so I never really have a chance to. But now that you're not with him today..."

Keigo spoke in a light-hearted tone, but Toru heard something else in his voice, and he felt sadness bloom in his chest. He couldn't help but be aware of Keigo's feelings for him.

"But, Club President, I..."

As soon as Toru started to speak, Keigo awkwardly reached over and placed one of his long fingers on Toru's lips.

"You don't have to say it. I understand. Can't we just stay as classmates? It's too sad for our relationship as friends to be over just because you can't answer my feelings. From now on, I just want to be a good senpai to you, Maiki."

Toru wondered if Keigo was forcing himself to say this, but his senpai seemed content. He even started humming. He had also been like this when he had suggested for them to start pretending to date.

Toru couldn't put his finger on it, but Keigo was always warm and gentle. He was such a good person. If Toru hadn't met Ryoji, maybe he could have fallen in love with Keigo. Toru stopped that thought immediately because he couldn't even imagine never meeting Ryoji.

The next day, Ryoji told him to go home without him again.

Even though it was only the second day, Toru secretly felt uneasy.

Whenever they were alone together, Ryoji would always tell him he wanted to have sex, and he hadn't said it at all the past two days.

"I wonder if he doesn't want to do it anymore," Toru mumbled to himself.

He started thinking of the worst-case scenario, wondering if Ryoji had already grown tired of him. He had had sex with Ryoji countless times, and they knew every inch of each other's bodies. He didn't think there was a spot on his body that Ryoji hadn't touched.

But, no matter how much you loved a toy, you would eventually get tired of it. He knew people lost interest in things some day.

Suddenly the face of a girl appeared in his mind, the one who had asked him earlier if Ryoji was seeing anyone. She had said she would ask Ryoji directly. In other words, she had been planning to confess her feelings to Ryoji. She was a really lively person, and she was also fairly cute. And she also had the huge chest Ryoji loved so much.

Maybe Ryoji had accepted her feelings? Even though he had told Toru he couldn't get enough of him, maybe Toru couldn't satisfy him and he had started to tire of Toru? Maybe her confession had been a good opportunity to...

"No, stop it!" Toru told himself. It wasn't good to get depressed like this. He didn't want to go to the Art Club today, so he decided to go straight home. He left the classroom and was about to take his shoes out of

his locker when he noticed a white envelope inside it. "What's this?"

Was it a love letter? No way...not in the age of cell phones and text messages. He opened it and took out the paper inside. It was a normal piece of paper with something typed on it. Right in the center it said, "I won't forgive you. Go to hell."

"What is this?" Toru murmured. He suddenly sensed that someone was watching him, so he looked up. There were numerous students around, but no one was looking at him.

He looked back down at the paper. No matter how you read it, this wasn't a love letter. And it wasn't a letter challenging him to a fight, either. Was it put in the wrong locker? No, their names were on their lockers, so that couldn't be it. It wasn't threatening him...was it just someone who had something against him? But why him? The only reasons Toru could think of had something to do with Ryoji. For example...Ayano Sakagami. He and Ryoji had had sex while Ryoji and Ayano were still together. Toru was the reason why those two had broken up. Although, he didn't know how she could have known that fact. But if she had found out about it, he could understand why she would tell him to "go to hell."

But was Ayano the only possibility? If the girls Ryoji had previously dated knew about Toru, would they be mad if they found out their ex-boyfriend was dating a guy? Thinking that, it seemed a lot of people would have a grudge against Toru.

Sighing, he put the paper back into the envelope

and then put it in his pocket. He couldn't do anything about it. He didn't know how to deal with it without knowing the identity of the sender, so he decided to just wait and see what would happen. If he received another letter then he would think about what to do. He also decided not to tell anyone about it, not Ryoji or Tadashi.

Even though he made such a calm decision, his heart was torn to pieces. Why did this have to happen now, just when he had started to doubt Ryoji's feelings for him? He was already uneasy enough as it was. Now he had to wait for the sender of the letter to make a move. Maybe whoever it was had been watching him from the shadows this whole time. Maybe the sender had noticed how weak he was right now. Maybe that person had realized that Ryoji had gotten tired of Toru, too.

That night, Ryoji called just as he had promised. When his phone rang, Toru quickly reached for it.

"It's me," Ryoji greeted.

"Yeah," Toru answered with a sigh.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, just spacing out. What are you doing?"

"On my way home," Ryoji said.

Toru could hear traffic noise in the background. He looked at the clock. It was almost eight o'clock. What had Ryoji been doing all this time? Toru felt his chest constrict with pain as he wondered.

Maybe Ryoji wasn't sure how to break up with him? Maybe he was just waiting for the right time to tell Toru they should be just friends?

But no matter how Ryoji tried to break up with him, Toru wouldn't be able to take it. It would be too painful to pretend to just be friends after all they had done together. He had tried to give up on Ryoji once before, and he knew he wouldn't be able to do it again this time. The closer he had gotten to Ryoji, the more his heart had grown comfortable with him. He couldn't bear losing Ryoji.

"Toru." Ryoji's voice suddenly changed from the casual tone he had been using. He sounded serious. Toru thought he was going to bring up the subject of breaking up. "Are you hiding something from me?"

Toru hadn't expected that question. "Hiding something? Like what?"

"That's what I'm asking! Are you keeping a secret from me?"

"What?" The first thing that went through Toru's mind was the letter he had found in his locker that day. Had Ryoji received the same kind of letter? Or had the sender told him directly? Toru wasn't sure if he should ask or not. "What about you? Are you hiding something?" he asked back.

Now it was Ryoji's turn to be silent. Toru sighed. He thought his worst fears were about to become a reality.

"Y-you idiot," Ryoji finally exclaimed. "Of course I'm not."

"Well, neither am I," Toru answered.

The conversation ended there. They both felt awkward and found it hard to continue. Toru wondered if it was because Ryoji had lost the timing of when to break up with him. Maybe Ryoji had wanted to use the letter as the reason. Toru wondered if Ryoji wanted to say something like they should stop such a strange relationship that would make a threatening letter come, and just go back to being friends. Or maybe Ryoji himself was involved with the letter. All sorts of thoughts whirled around in Toru's head. He clutched his cell phone in his hand, trembling.

The next day at school there was another letter inside his locker. He froze, and then slowly took the letter out. There were other students around, so he quickly stuffed it in his pocket, and then casually checked Ryoji's locker. The only thing inside were his shoes. Apparently Ryoji hadn't arrived yet. Toru was relieved that there wasn't a letter there. He started walking to the classroom and pulled out the letter when he came to an empty hallway.

On the note was written: "It's not fair that only you get to be happy. I'll make sure you break up with Ryoji Nakajo."

Now Toru was doubly sure that the sender was related to Ryoji. It could be an ex-girlfriend or maybe someone Ryoji was dating now. He didn't know if the sender was just one person or a group of people.

He also didn't know whether or not Ryoji knew about the situation. But he started thinking about the phone conversation the night before. It was strange for Ryoji to ask if there was something Toru was hiding. The question seemed to refer to something deeper than the letter.

It was strange to doubt someone you loved. Toru felt bad for feeling that way. Ryoji was usually straightforward. But, since their romantic relationship had started the way it had, once Toru began to feel uneasy, it was hard to stop it.

"Toru? What are you doing here?" Ryoji's voice suddenly asked.

Toru jumped. He quickly hid the letter in his pocket.

"Good morning," he said casually.

"Morning," Ryoji answered quickly. He walked past, saying, "I'm going inside the classroom now."

Even though there wasn't anyone else around them, Ryoji hadn't touched even Toru's arm. Just a few days earlier, when they were alone like this, he had stolen kisses from Toru. His cold attitude was like a stone thrown into the water. Toru felt the painful ripples beneath the surface.

"I guess it's no use..." he said to himself. His eyes began to sting. But he knew he couldn't start crying here. He bit his lip hard and started up the stairs. He didn't want to make a big deal out of it when Ryoji told him he wanted to break up. If he could, he wanted to smile and say, "Okay." But could he do that? He wasn't confident that he could.

When lunch came, Ryoji bolted off to the cafeteria. He would usually finish his packed lunch by the end of second period, so he would buy something small like bread at lunchtime. Tadashi had also finished his lunch early today, so he went off with Ryoji to buy a sandwich.

When Toru was left alone, he initially planned to wait for his friends in the classroom. But he decided to head to the lounge, in the opposite direction of the cafeteria.

"Maiki," a voice called from behind him.

He didn't have to turn around to know who it was. "What's up, Club President?"

"You're not eating lunch, Maiki?"

"No..."

Now that Keigo had mentioned it, Toru had left his lunch box in the classroom. But now it was too much of a bother to go back and get it. He didn't feel like eating lunch anyway.

"Are you worried about something again?" Kashiwazaki asked, peering at him. Toru wasn't sure what to say, so he remained silent. "Bull's eye? Is it something about love? Don't tell me Mr. Trouble's got you worrying again?"

"Club President..." Toru burst out laughing at the teasing tone of Keigo's voice. Ever since he had first asked advice on his relationship with Ryoji, Keigo had always referred to Ryoji as "Mr. Trouble."

"Well, at any rate, let's not just stand here," said Keigo. "Want to come to the Art Room? I have enough pastries for you, if you want some."

“Cream bun again?”

“No, today it’s sweet French bread.” Keigo had quite a sweet tooth.

Toru nodded. He liked the soft French bread with butter cream inside. “But, that’s...”

Keigo grinned. “Yeah, I know. There’s not enough cream in the ends. So you have to open it up and spread the butter over it.”

He ate the cream bun the same way before. Toru still marveled at how similar his and Keigo’s eating habits were. If it was Ryoji, he would throw away the parts that didn’t taste good. Tadashi would just eat it the way it was. Toru thought that the way people ate things said a lot about their personalities.

He and Keigo sat down next to the window in the Art Room and ate the breads together. Even though Toru hadn’t intended to ask Keigo for advice, he ended up doing so anyway. He knew it was cruel to talk to Keigo about Ryoji, and he knew it was wrong. But he always found himself doing it, perhaps because he was weak.

“And?” Keigo prompted. “Has he forced you to do anything again?”

Toru shook his head. “No, that’s not it. It’s a letter...”

“A letter?”

“This.” Toru took the two letters from his pocket.

Keigo took them and quickly read them. “Where did you find these? In your shoe locker?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s kind of old fashioned,” Keigo murmured.

Toru was somehow relieved at Keigo’s carefree

reaction. All his tension and nervousness melted away when he heard that. He was glad Keigo wasn’t acting so seriously.

“So you think it might be some girl who likes Ryoji?” Keigo asked.

“I can’t think of anyone else,” Toru said, nodding. “Maybe Ryoji has another girlfriend. And maybe he just can’t figure out how to break up with me.”

“Aren’t you just imagining this?” Keigo asked. “You’re just guessing. First, you need to ask him yourself. And if what you think is true, then maybe my chance has finally come.”

“Club President...”

“I’m just joking!” Keigo stuck out his tongue. “But anyway, you need to make sure you know how he’s feeling. And then you need to find out who’s been sending these letters. Even though it’s just a letter, it’s definitely harassment. It’s definitely not a good thing.” He added, looking directly at Toru, “And if he won’t protect you, I will. I’m serious about that.”

“Club President, that’s...”

“Don’t worry, I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

Toru didn’t know how to respond. Even though it would be troublesome if Keigo did have some kind of ulterior motive, putting Keigo in this position was making Toru feel bad all over again. He knew he was taking advantage of Keigo’s kindness. But he didn’t have anyone else to talk to about Ryoji.

“But is it really someone connected with Ryoji?” Keigo wondered. “You can’t think of anyone else?”

“Like who?”

"Hmm...for example—"

The door suddenly flew open. Toru automatically jumped up from his chair.

"What are you doing here?" Ryoji demanded. His face was pale and he was panting.

Toru wondered what was going on. "Ryoji, what's—"

"That's what I want to know!" Ryoji yelled. "You left your lunch box in the classroom, and no matter how long I waited, you didn't come back! I've been looking all over for you! And here you are, leisurely eating pastries with this guy!"

Toru scowled. "Leisurely?"

"You don't have to talk to him like that," Keigo interrupted. "Maiki came to ask for my advice."

"Advice?! About what?" Ryoji yelled angrily.

"Well..."

"What? Is it something you can't tell me?" Ryoji demanded. "Why don't you ever tell me anything, Toru? Why do you always depend on this guy?"

Keigo seemed annoyed at being called "this guy," since he was Ryoji's rival in love, after all. "He was worried that you were cheating on him, so how could he ask for your advice on that topic? Right, Maiki?"

"C-club President!?" Toru's heart pounded.

Ryoji was shocked as well. "Cheating? What are you talking about?" He ignored Keigo, grabbing Toru's shoulder and shaking it. "Huh? Who's cheating on who? What made you think I was cheating on you?"

"Because..."

"Stop," Keigo said, pointing to the door. "Can you



continue this outside? I want to take a nap.”

He said it casually, but Toru jumped again. He knew Keigo didn't want to hear something like this. It would make him uncomfortable.

“I'm sorry. Excuse me. Club President, thanks.” He bowed his head deeply, grabbed Ryoji's arm and dragged him out into the hallway.

Once they were outside of the Art Room, Ryoji in turn grabbed Toru's arm and headed towards the stairs.

“Ryoji...”

“Let's go to the roof.”

“But it's cold!”

“Then there won't be anyone else there!” Ryoji spat, quickening his pace.

Toru reluctantly followed him, biting his lip all the while.

“Okay, go ahead, explain,” Ryoji said impatiently when they reached the roof.

“Well...”

“Why would I cheat on you, idiot?”

“Because...lately...”

“Huh? I can't hear you!”

“You haven't asked me to...lately...”

When Toru said this, Ryoji got a confused look on his face.

“What do you mean...?” he asked.

“I thought you got tired of me!” Toru burst out. “And that girl confessed her feelings to you, so I thought you accepted and started going out with her. Ow!” he yelped when Ryoji suddenly flicked his forehead with his fingers.

“You're such an idiot,” Ryoji said. “Why would I go out with a girl when I have you?”

“Because...” Toru put his hand on his throbbing forehead. He felt tears welling up in his eyes. *How pathetic*, he thought. He didn't want this to be a big deal, and he hated himself for being so weak. “You don't want to sleep with me anymore. And it seemed like you were hiding something from me.”

“That's you!” Ryoji retorted. “And when did I ever say I didn't want to sleep with you anymore?”

You didn't have to tell me for me to realize it, Toru thought.

“You think I'm that much of an idiot to get tired after just three days of not having sex?” Ryoji went on. “Tadashi scolded me for pushing you too hard. But I can't help it! If I could, I'd fuck you every single day. I just want to do whatever I want to you, no matter where we are. I want to suck you so bad, I want to thrust inside of you so hard you'd cry. I'd fuck you all day if I could.”

“Ryoji?” Toru couldn't believe his ears. What did Ryoji just say?

“But it has to be hard on you physically. I didn't realize it until Tadashi told me you looked pale and that I was pushing you too much. I couldn't say anything back. I thought maybe he was right.”

Toru's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't even thought about that. He hadn't thought Ryoji was the kind of person to listen to someone else's opinion, anyway.

“He told me if I loved you then I needed to think about your feelings more,” Ryoji said desperately. “But

when I look at your face I want to make love to you so badly. I tried to let my feelings out by focusing on sports and going to swimming club more, but it didn't work. The feeling you get from sports and sex are completely different. My feelings just didn't go away. So I decided to back off, and the second I did, you went to an art exhibit with that asshole from the Art Club! You guys went out together, didn't you? And you hid it from me."

"What?" Toru was surprised that Ryoji knew about him going to the exhibit with Keigo, but he didn't think it would bother Ryoji so much. "How did you...?"

"You didn't know? I was wondering where you were, so I went to the Art Room and some freshman told me. He said, 'Maiki-senpai went to an art exhibit with Kashiwazaki-senpai.' Then the kid said, 'They have a lot in common, so they really get along together.' Why do you have to tell Kashiwazaki everything?" Ryoji added, annoyed. Then he looked as if he remembered something else and said, "Oh, yeah! He knows about us, right? Because you pretended to go out with him before. I guess it would be easy to talk to him. But still, if it involves me, I want you to tell me directly, okay?" He put his hand on Toru's shoulder. "I know that I haven't done much to earn your trust, and I'm selfish and conceited, but you're the only one for me, Toru. Seriously. I'd even dive into the pool and swim five meters for you!"

"But don't you hate diving?" Toru said weakly.

"Yeah. I'm telling you I'd do stuff that I hate for you! Trust me. I wouldn't cheat on you!" Ryoji grabbed Toru and pulled him close, hugging him tightly.

It felt as if it had been so long since they had embraced like this. A sense of relief spread throughout Toru's body.

"Ryoji...someone might see us."

"No one's up here," Ryoji whispered.

The two of them stayed that way until the bell rang signaling the end of lunch.

Ryoji had a ten-minute club meeting, so he had told Toru to wait by the lockers. Toru now stood frozen in front of his open shoe locker. Inside had been another one of those letters. When he read it, the content was a lot more serious than any of the other letters.

"Don't you have any shame? You're terrible. Where do you think this is? Don't ever hug like that at school again, you piece of shit!"

Whoever had sent this one must have seen him and Ryoji on the roof that day. Maybe the person liked Ryoji and was turning into a stalker or something. If so, Toru couldn't do anything about being watched. But he did regret being careless.

He hadn't told Ryoji about the letters, but he wondered if he should, after all. At the very least, he knew it wasn't from a girl Ryoji was dating currently. It had to be someone he had broken up with, or someone who had a crush on him.

"What are you looking at, Toru?" a voice behind him said, and a hand snatched the letter he was holding.

"Hey!" Toru tried to grab the letter back, but it was too late. Tadashi quickly read the contents, his eyes widening. Toru's face turned pale. "T-Tadashi, that's..."

"Who is this from?" Tadashi demanded, looking at Toru.

"I-I don't know," Toru whispered, his face down.

"Someone's threatening you about Ryoji?" Tadashi ranted. "This isn't the first time, is it? I thought you were acting weird lately. Was it because of this? I'm sorry, I said a bunch of things I shouldn't have to Ryoji. Have you told Ryoji about this? He didn't say a word to me..."

Toru shook his head. "Can you not tell him yet?"

"Why?"

"Well...I'm not exactly sure that it's a big deal..." It had to be from someone who liked Ryoji so much that they despised Toru. It wasn't as if he couldn't understand those feelings, so he couldn't blame the sender for acting that way.

"What do you mean? Of course it's a big deal!" Tadashi exclaimed. "Whoever sent this is screwed up! You bottle everything up too much, Toru. You need to tell that idiot!"

"Tell what to what idiot?" Ryoji suddenly interrupted. Toru quickly snatched the letter back from Tadashi. "Hey, did you just hide something? Let me see it, Toru."

"N-no."

"Are you sure you're not the one cheating on me?" Ryoji asked, suspicious. "Is that a love letter from

someone? From Kashiwazaki?"

"Of course not!" Toru cried out.

"Then show me! If you don't, I'll assume you're cheating on me!"

"I-I wouldn't cheat on you."

Tadashi spoke up. "It's a threatening letter. Someone's harassing Toru for going out with you. They're totally making him out to be the bad guy."

Toru glared at Tadashi and told him to shut up, but it was too late.

"A threatening letter?! Are you serious? Let me see it!" Ryoji grabbed the letter from Toru's hands and unfolded it. "What the hell is this?"

"I told you, a threatening letter!" said Tadashi.

"But why would someone send this to Toru? Hey, is this the only one?"

Ryoji and Tadashi both stared at Toru. Toru took a few steps back.

"There are more, right?" Tadashi asked.

Toru gave up and took the other two letters from his pocket. Both of his friends snatched them out of his hands and started reading them.

"Make us break up? Who the hell would...oh!" Suddenly something flashed on Ryoji's angry face. "You got this, so I guess you're not cheating on me, huh?" he said, looking content. "I know who sent these—Kashiwazaki."

"What?" Toru was horrified at this sudden accusation. "W-why?"

"Isn't it obvious? He's the only one who knows about us, right?" Ryoji pointed out.

"I don't think it's him," Tadashi said calmly. "I don't think he'd be mean to Toru. If he'd harass anyone, it'd be you."

"Why?" Ryoji asked, his lips tightening.

"That's right!" Toru piped in. "Club President doesn't have anything to do with this. And he gave me advice about us...I thought it was a girl Ryoji had dated or was dating now..."

"Wait a second, you told Kashiwazaki about these letters?" Ryoji squawked. "And you didn't tell me? You didn't say a word about it at lunch!"

"Because he knew you'd make a big deal out of it like you're doing now, right, Toru?" Tadashi said. But that comment was just like throwing more gas on the fire.

"Don't you think that's weird?" said Ryoji. "This one says they'll make us break up! The people involved are me and Toru! So why wouldn't he say anything to me, and instead talk to that outsider, Kashiwazaki?"

"Would an outsider be able to give him accurate advice?" Tadashi said, trying to soothe Ryoji's anger.

"Anyway, what's going on with you and Kashiwazaki?" Ryoji demanded

"What do you mean? We're in the Art—"

"Is that it?" Ryoji persisted. "Is that it, Toru?"

Suddenly Tadashi shushed them. The two fell silent.

"What?" Ryoji asked, irritated.

"Toru, do you know that kid?"

The two followed Tadashi's gaze to a boy standing not very far from them. He was looking at them while

trying to hide in the shadows.

Toru nodded.

"Um...yeah. He's a freshman named Ishihara who's also in the Art Club. I wonder if he wants something."

"It looks like he came to watch the aftermath of what he'd done," Tadashi said flatly.

"What?" Toru asked. "What do you mean?"

"Hey, that's the guy who told me you and Kashiwazaki went to the art exhibit?" Ryoji said angrily. "Is it him?! That bastard hiding in the shadows?"

"There's no way it can be him," said Toru.

"Then let's ask him!" Ryoji said, but Tadashi grabbed his shirt and went on ahead to Ishihara.

Ishihara noticed the three boys coming towards him. He turned on his heel and ran off.

"You bastard!" This time, Ryoji didn't hesitate and ran towards Ishihara at full force, grabbing him.

"We're right, aren't we? Otherwise why would he run away?" Tadashi whispered, but Toru denied it once again. "He's been watching us the whole time, Toru. Anyway, let's hear what he has to say."

"B-but, does this mean Ishihara likes Ryoji?" Toru wondered.

How were the two connected? Ishihara was a freshman, so he wouldn't have much opportunity to see Ryoji. Well, Ryoji did stand out a lot, so maybe Ishihara had a crush on him and had feelings for him just like Toru had? Maybe Ishihara had looked down on the pool from the Art Room window and watched Ryoji swimming just as Toru had?

Ryoji pushed Ishihara up against the wall so the boy couldn't move.

In the Art Club, Toru had thought Ishihara was a serious person. The boy rarely joined in on conversations, but just concentrated on his sketches. When Ishihara had first introduced himself to the members of the club, he had looked down shyly and told them he had loved drawing since he was a child.

"Why, Ishihara? Was this letter really from you?" Toru asked in disbelief.

Ishihara was silent.

"Ryoji, let him go," Toru ordered. "He looks like he's in pain!"

"Idiot, if I let him go, he'll run away!" Ryoji retorted.

"I told you, it can't be Ishihara!" Toru insisted.

"It is me," Ishihara suddenly said.

"What?" Toru asked, shocked.

"I'm the one who sent those," Ishihara yelled. "You already know, right?"

"What do you have against Toru, you bastard?" Ryoji asked.

"No way...I didn't know you liked Ryoji, Ishihara..." Toru whispered, dumbfounded.

"Are you an idiot?" Ishihara said angrily. "Why the hell would I like a player like him? You have terrible taste, Maiki-senpai. If you're his friend, I'm sure you know he's sampled every girl he's ever met! So why would you want to be with him after that?"

Toru's eyes widened. For a moment, he couldn't understand what Ishihara had said.

"Whoa, did you hear what he called you?" Tadashi said.

"I'm...a player?" Ryoji muttered, relaxing his grip on Ishihara.

"Probably," Tadashi answered.

Ishihara ignored their exchange and kept glaring straight at Toru. "Any way you look at it, Kashiwazaki-senpai's way better than him. I can't believe you dumped him to go out with this guy! I can't forgive you. I'll make you regret hurting him!" He quickly squirmed free from Ryoji's hold and ran away, leaving the three boys standing there dumbfounded.

"What the hell did that mean?" Ryoji asked to no one in particular.

"Have you really had every girl you've ever met?" Tadashi asked, amused.

"That's not what I meant," Ryoji said, irritated. "Did he just say Toru dumped Kashiwazaki?"

Tadashi nodded. "That's what he said."

"What is that about?" Ryoji asked, turning to Toru. "I thought Kashiwazaki's just your senpai? So what you said about pretending to date him before..."

"That's..." Toru quickly tried to come up with an explanation, but Tadashi saved him.

"Remember? Kashiwazaki was the one who had feelings for Toru. Not the other way around."

"Kashiwazaki does? For real? Damn it!" Ryoji exclaimed angrily, kicking the lockers.

"Calm down!" Tadashi admonished. "It's not that surprising that someone else has feelings for Toru. Anyway, you have no right to blame Toru."

"That's not what I'm doing!" Ryoji said vehemently. "I'm asking what their relationship is! I want to know if Toru knew Kashiwazaki had feelings for him when Kashiwazaki asked him to pretend they were going out. Did Kashiwazaki think it was the real thing or what? He was serious, but Toru wasn't. Apparently he had some kind of ulterior motive..."

"Club President isn't like that!" Toru said suddenly.

"Why are you protecting him, idiot?" Ryoji retorted.

"Shouldn't we go somewhere else? This is school, after all..." Tadashi said calmly, and the other two nodded.

Ryoji was silent as they walked to his house. When they got there, he told Tadashi to go home because he was in the way. Tadashi cast a worried look at Toru, but he knew it was a problem between Toru and Ryoji, so he reluctantly left.

Left alone with Ryoji, Toru kept wondering what he should say. Ryoji seemed so angry as he led Toru to the bedroom. Toru thought it probably wouldn't matter what he said.

"Ryoji..." Toru hesitantly said. He thought maybe it would be best to say that they should give it some time and talk later. "I think I'll go home for today..."

"Did you know?" Ryoji asked, still irritated.

"What?"

"Did you know Kashiwazaki liked you?"

"Not at first," Toru quickly said. "I only knew he liked me after he suggested we pretend to go out. If I had known about his feelings before that, I wouldn't have agreed to his plan."

Toru couldn't help wondering why it bothered Ryoji so much.

"How did you find out?" Ryoji asked. "Did he do something to you? What did he do to you?"

"Noth—" Toru started to say, but stopped himself.

Truthfully, Keigo had kissed him once. When they had gone to the planetarium together and Toru had started crying over Ryoji, Keigo had kissed him to try to comfort him. That had given Toru a clue about Keigo's feelings for him. Toru couldn't pretend to go out with Keigo after that.

"Why are you asking me this?" Toru asked Ryoji.

"I just want to know," Ryoji replied stubbornly. "He looks like he's fast, so maybe he used the pretend dating as an excuse to make a move on you."

"He's not like that!"

"What? He's just a good senpai who gives you advice? He wouldn't be so nice to you for no reason!" Ryoji said bluntly.

Toru was visibly angry. "Will you stop judging him?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Isn't it..." Toru didn't get to finish his sentence. Ryoji grabbed his arm and pushed him towards

the bed. "Ryoji!"

Ryoji didn't say anything. He just pinned Toru down while stripping off his clothes. It wasn't unusual for him to be forceful, but usually he would get Toru ready first.

Toru cried out at Ryoji's impatience. "No! I don't want to do it like this!"

Ryoji's member entered him. A sharp pain raced through Toru, and his body stiffened.

"This is so cruel!" Toru shouted. "Stop it! What am I to you, Ryoji? Am I just a doll you fuck when you want to? It doesn't matter to you how you treat me? Don't you ever think about how you're hurting me?"

"What about me?" Ryoji suddenly said in a calm voice. He stopped moving so aggressively, as he looked down at Toru. "You assume I'm cheating on you and keep quiet about it. Then you go ask advice from a guy who you know likes you. Don't you think that hurts my feelings too?"

Toru hadn't thought about that. He looked up at Ryoji in astonishment.

"Why can't you trust me?" Ryoji asked, visibly frustrated. "Maybe I am a player and have zero reliability. But I told you I love you! I told you you're the only one I think about, right? How many times do we have to sleep together for you to know that? Please, trust me!" he begged. "Trust me! I won't cheat on you. I just want you, Toru. Because I love you so much. Please."

"Ryoji..." Toru reached out both his hands and wrapped them around Ryoji's neck. He pulled Ryoji close and held him, and then whispered, "I'm sorry," in



his ear. "It's not that I don't trust you. I wanted to trust you. I did trust you. But I thought I was the only one who loved you and you didn't love me back."

"You idiot!" Ryoji snapped "What are you talking about? That was years ago! My feelings have changed!"

Toru didn't correct him that it was just a few months ago. Their lips met in a sweet kiss. It felt like forever, even though it had been only a few days, since they had last kissed. Toru felt something inside of him tremble at the sensation of it. Even though they had had sex so many times, he was always so happy when Ryoji touched him. It was as if his whole body answered Ryoji's touch.

Even if Ryoji had forced himself on Toru in the beginning, no matter how much it hurt or how painful it was, and no matter how angry Toru got, Toru knew he would always forgive Ryoji in the end. He thought he was an idiot for feeling that way, but he was content with it.

Ryoji stopped being violent with him. He touched Toru gently now, still seeming to beg Toru to trust him. He wrapped Toru up in his arms. His impatience earlier seemed like it had never happened. After he got Toru ready, he gently entered him.

Ahh..." Toru moaned.

"I'm sorry, was it too early?" Ryoji asked worriedly.

"No, I'm fine," Toru sighed. His heart was pounding and the feeling of pressure was great, but it didn't hurt anymore.

He clung to Ryoji's back and closed his eyes. His breathing synchronized with Ryoji's.

"It's been three days..." Ryoji whispered teasingly.

Toru smiled and nodded. They made love slowly, taking their time.

Toru knew he needed to talk to Ishihara. The next day at lunch he went to Ishihara's classroom by himself. Ryoji had offered to go with him, but Tadashi had stopped him, saying Ryoji wouldn't be able to keep a cool head if he went.

Ryoji wasn't happy about it, but he consented and told Toru to be careful.

However, Toru didn't really know what he would say.

"Hey, can you get Ishihara for me?" he asked a group of girls standing at the back of the classroom. The girls went to go get their classmate right away.

As soon as Ishihara saw Toru, an unpleasant look crossed his face.

"What is it?" he asked belligerently.

"Can we talk?" Toru requested. "Maybe up on the roof?"

"But it's cold," Ishihara protested, perhaps imitating Ryoji and Toru's conversation from the day before. "I don't want anyone else to hear what I have to say."

"I thought so."

Ishihara sighed and followed Toru to the roof. When they got there, a cold northern wind was blowing. Toru wanted to hurry up and get the conversation over with so he could go back inside.

"I'm just going to ask you straight up," Toru said, "do you like Kashiwazaki-senpai, Ishihara?"

"I'm different from you," Ishihara spat. "I just respect Kashiwazaki-senpai. He's a talented artist and he's a nice guy. He's smart and just a really great person. He's like a god to me."

Toru was surprised, but he was also a little disappointed. So Ishihara hadn't been targeting Toru because of jealousy? "I see..." he murmured.

Now that he thought about it, if Ishihara liked Kashiwazaki, it would have been better for him if Toru had a boyfriend. If that were the case, even if Ishihara was mad at Toru for breaking up with Kashiwazaki, the boy probably wouldn't hate him for it.

"So do you just think I'm an idiot for not being able to answer the feelings of someone who's like a god, then?" Toru asked instead.

"So you do understand," Ishihara said, nodding.

"But just because someone else likes you doesn't mean you'll like them back," Toru pointed out. "I don't think you have to. No matter how wonderful the person is, or how great they are."

"That's why I think you're an idiot," Ishihara retorted.

"What?" Toru stiffened at the hateful sound in Ishihara's voice. He hadn't thought Ishihara was the

type of person to act like this.

"What's so great about that guy, anyway?" Ishihara jeered.

"You don't know anything about Ryoji," Toru said defensively.

"I do," Ishihara snapped. "Sakagami told me how terrible he is. And he went right from her to you. It's like he'd screw anything that has a hole."

"Don't talk about Ryoji like that!" Toru's said in a firm voice.

Ishihara looked surprised, quickly covering his mouth.

"Wait...Sakagami...you mean Ayano Sakagami?" said Toru. "The girl Ryoji dated a while ago? You guys are in the same class?"

"Yeah," Ishihara murmured.

"I see...Ishihara, do you..."

"She doesn't matter," said Ishihara. "Anyway, I can't forgive you for being so insensitive, even going so far as to ask Kashiwazaki-senpai for love advice."

Toru agreed with him on that point. He bowed his head. "That's true. I really feel bad about that. Kashiwazaki-senpai is so kind, I just find myself going to him."

"Give me a break," Ishihara said scornfully.

It seemed that no matter how much Toru tried to talk to him, they just wouldn't be able to get along. Toru let out a small sigh.

At that same moment, Ryoji had gone to see Keigo in the Art Room.

He told him Ishihara had been sending those letters.

Keigo said, "I can't believe it!"

"Well, you can believe whatever you want," Ryoji retorted. "But anyway, Toru went to go talk to him about it."

"So you're saying my feelings for Maiki are causing trouble?" Keigo asked.

"I guess I've done the same for you." Ryoji still didn't like Keigo, but he had to admit that much. "I don't think it'll happen again, though. From now on, I'll take care of Toru so he won't have to come to you anymore."

"Hmmm...really?" Keigo said, skeptically.

"I won't make him cry anymore," Ryoji stubbornly said. "When I don't have things under control, all he does is bear with it."

"So you get it now, huh?" Keigo laughed. "Looks like you've grown a little. Well, should we go?"

"Huh? Where?" Ryoji asked.

"Didn't you say Maiki is with Ishihara? He shouldn't have to do that by himself."

Ryoji felt guilty. He wondered if what Ishihara had said the day before about Kashiwazaki being better than him was true. But he knew he loved Toru more than anyone.

"Toru." Hearing his name, Toru looked up. He saw Ryoji running towards him, with Keigo following close behind.

"What, you brought in reinforcements?" Ishihara asked.

"No..." Toru murmured.

"We came here by ourselves, idiot," Ryoji said.

Ishihara grimaced angrily.

"Ishihara." Hearing Keigo call his name, Ishihara's face softened. "Let's stop this. Even if you're doing this for me, it doesn't make me happy at all. I'll feel bad if these two break up because of this. I wouldn't even be able to look Maiki in the eye."

"Why?" Ishihara asked petulantly.

"Because I was the one who had illicit love for Maiki in the first place," Keigo explained.

"Illicit love?" Ishihara echoed.

Keigo nodded. "Yeah. I was just too late. But that's not the problem here. Even if I had loved him first, I don't think he would have chosen me."

Ishihara quietly hung his head. His shoulders drooped.

"Let's go," Keigo said, and started walking away. He turned around by the door and winked at Toru over his shoulder before leaving.

"He's stuck-up, as usual," Ryoji said with a sigh after the two had disappeared.

"Ryoji," Toru said, chiding him. He smiled a little. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Yeah, well..."

"I'm happy you came," Toru said.

"I wonder if everything will be fine, though," Ryoji mused. "You'll be in the same club with Ishihara for another year. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah," Toru said, nodding. "I think so."

"Really?" Ryoji asked, peering at him. He was worried that Ishihara might try to harass Toru again in the future, or spread rumors about their relationship.

"If he wanted to tell someone, he probably would have done it already," Toru pointed out. "He could have told the whole school instead of sending those letters, but he didn't."

"I guess you're right. But if he ever does anything to you again, I'll protect you," Ryoji promised.

"What?" Toru asked, surprised.

Ryoji scowled. "Why are you so surprised? Did I say something weird?"

"Did you just say...you'd protect me? Or did I just imagine it?"

"You're so mean!" Ryoji said, playfully tapping Toru on the head. Toru laughed. "Of course I'll protect you," he added, sounding serious.

Toru nodded earnestly. "Well, if anyone does anything to you, I'll protect you, too, Ryoji."

"No, that's okay. I can protect myself..."

"Who's the mean one now?"

They both laughed and then hugged each other. The wind was cold, so feeling each other's warmth made them even happier.

"Hey," Ryoji said as they started to walk back downstairs. "I just want to say it again, just in case you still don't believe me, I won't cheat on you. I'm serious

about you, Toru."

Toru felt a sweet feeling spread throughout his heart. He didn't know what to say.

"Did you hear me?" Ryoji prompted.

Toru nodded.

"Do you believe me?" Ryoji asked.

Toru nodded again. Ryoji smiled shyly.

"Ryoji."

"Hmm?"

"From now on when I'm worried about something, I'll talk to you about it first," Toru promised. "Even if it involves you. Before I start jumping to conclusions and getting all depressed, I'll tell you first. And I want you to listen to me. And—"

"Of course!" Ryoji interrupted. He stretched his hand out to Toru. "Me, too. No matter what that piece of shit Tadashi says to me, I'll make decisions only after I talk to you about it so there will be no more misunderstandings."

Toru grabbed Ryoji's outstretched hand. "Okay."

Ryoji kissed him on the cheek. It felt gentle, like wind brushing against his skin.

I Have Worries, Too

Why didn't I think about it before? I've spent all this time without considering it. And just when I start thinking about it, I find out that I can't do anything about it. I can't stop thinking about it.

I'm talking about everything having to do with Toru Maiki.

There are just too many things I don't know about him.

When we were just friends, it wasn't a problem if I didn't know certain things about him. But now it's different.

At first, I forced a physical relationship on him. Even though I thought he was precious, I tried to monopolize him. I didn't realize how insensitive I had been until recently. And now I'm so pissed off about my selfishness, I've gone beyond just feeling bad. I act like everything is fine, but it isn't. I believe that Toru is wrong for forgiving me.

Toru always bottles up his feelings. I know I have to be more careful so he doesn't feel that way ever again. I know that, but things don't always work out the way I want them to.

"Ryoji, what are you thinking about?"

I'm about to go home from my club meeting and, while standing at the shoe lockers, Tadashi Yamauchi

comes up to me. There's only a little bit of third semester left. The third-year students will graduate soon, and, after final exams, the school year will be over.

"Oh, Tadashi," I greet my friend. "Are you going home now?"

"Yeah. You?" He looks around, probably trying to see where Toru is. We're always together nowadays.

"Oh, Toru went to a bon voyage party for the Art Club," I say. "Didn't he tell you?"

"A bon voyage party?" Tadashi chuckles.

I scowl at him. "What?"

He continues to laugh. "You mean a farewell party, right? What are we, French?"

"How should I know?" I snap. "That's what Toru said it was! He said 'I'm going to a bon voyage party for the Art Club. Go ahead without me.'"

"Why are they doing it now?" Tadashi wonders. "Don't they usually do it before the third-year students graduate?"

"I don't know! He said it was more convenient this way."

"Hmmm...I wonder if he's okay with—what was that dude's name? Ishihara?"

"He's fine. If that brat tries anything again, I'll beat the shit out of him."

Tadashi bursts out laughing again. "Well, I guess Kashiwazaki-san is with Toru, too, so there's no need to worry." It seems he's trying to provoke me. "Don't look so jealous!" he adds.

"Shut up!"

I ignore him and leave without him. He catches up

with me at the school gate.

"Hey, are you worried about something? Is it about Toru?" The teasing sound in his voice irritates me, but I don't have anyone else to talk with.

I reluctantly say, "Do you know when Toru's birthday is?"

"Hmm...when was it again?" Tadashi wonders aloud.

I guess it isn't too unusual for friends not to know this. Of course girls always know this sort of thing, but guys don't usually celebrate each other's birthdays. That's something you'd do in kindergarten.

"I think he said it was during summer vacation," Tadashi guesses. "Or maybe spring?"

"Yeah. It's coming up. March 27th."

"Oh, really? What about it?" Tadashi asks casually.

"We forgot it last year," I reply. "Well, more like we didn't know about it."

"I don't know your birthday either, you know," Tadashi points out. "You probably don't know mine, too!"

I want to say I don't give a shit when his birthday is, but I don't want to piss him off.

"So it's March 27th, huh?" Tadashi murmurs. "What a crappy day for a birthday. It's during spring break, so he won't get to celebrate it at school."

"I know!"

I found out about it a few days ago.

Toru had dropped his student notebook and when I picked it up for him, his student ID card fell out. His

birthday was written on it.

"Hey, your birthday is coming up!" I had said.

He smiled shyly and just nodded, softly saying, "Yeah."

Last year his birthday had gone by without me noticing it. And the year before that, I didn't know him yet. Toru told me people forgot his birthday a lot because it was during spring break, so I decided I definitely wanted to celebrate it this year.

Tadashi gazes at me with an understanding look on his face. "I see. You're worrying about what to get him, huh?"

"Yeah," I answer. He's always sharp about these things. "Do you know if he wants anything?" I ask him.

"Huh? Why are you asking me?"

"Research."

"Why don't you ask him?" he says. Then he tilts his head and whispers, "Wait, that won't work. Even if you ask him, he'll just say, 'Oh, you don't have to get me a present.'"

"That's what I thought, too!"

For some strange reason, Toru never wants anything. Or, if he does, he never says anything about it.

"You just have to guess. Aren't you his boyfriend?" Tadashi says.

I know that. That's why I'm so worried!

"Don't get mad," Tadashi says quickly, probably seeing my angry expression. "Things are different now. Toru understands you now. Why don't you just take him somewhere and tell him you'll buy him whatever he

wants? He might hesitate at first, but he'll probably go along with it."

That might be true, but I'm not satisfied with just that. I want to surprise Toru. I want to know what he wants without him having to tell me. I want to make him say, 'Wow, Ryoji! How did you know I wanted this?' and make his eyes open wide and make him happy. That would be the best scenario. It would make me so proud to see his happy face.

Tadashi must have guessed what I was thinking because he says, "Toru would probably like anything you give him, even if it's just a tissue you blow your nose with."

"You're sick, dude," I retort.

"What I'm trying to say is," Tadashi says as if to a child, "as long as you pick it out for him, I'm sure he'll love it! So stop acting so ridiculous. You never really think that much anyway, so why are you so worried now? It's kind of gross. Why don't you stop wasting all your time thinking and just go to an art store and buy him some art supplies or something? See ya," he concludes before running off.

What a cold bastard. Tadashi always favors Toru more than me, so maybe he's jealous that I got Toru first. I know that what I did to Toru in the beginning was wrong, and I feel bad about it. But that's why I want to be nicer to Toru from now on. I just want him to come to me when he needs to talk about something. Maybe I'm too naïve.

I sigh and kick a rock by my foot, and start to walk again. It seems even colder now that I'm alone. I always

take for granted Toru being by my side.

I wish he could be with me all the time.

What does Toru like about me, anyway? I know it's weird for me to ask it myself, but I've never heard him tell me. He says he's loved me for a long time, but he never says what he loves about me.

He once told me what he liked about Kashiwazaki, though. That was when he wanted to stop having a physical relationship with me, and before I realized how I felt about him. That night, he told me over the phone that he was going out with Kashiwazaki. That moment almost felt like when your pet dog bites you. I know that's not the right analogy, but that's the closest thing I can think of to describe the feeling. I was so shocked it was like someone had poured cold water over my head.

I had been surprised enough to hear that he was going out with Kashiwazaki, but then he told me he had had feelings for him for a long time. I didn't think it was an act at the time. If he had told me in person and not over the phone, I think I would have pushed him down, stripped him naked, and forced him to have sex with me right then and there.

But now I understand why I felt that way. I was jealous.

I was jealous that he had feelings for someone other than me. After that time I realized that when I had sex, all I could think of was him.

I got so frustrated I couldn't stand it.

Even when he told me later on that it was a lie, that burning feeling of jealousy still lingered inside of me.

During that fateful phone call, he also told me what he liked about Kashiwazaki. He sounded so happy then. But, even though we're okay now, he never says anything like that about me.

I realize something terrible and stop walking.

Toru has never kissed me.

I'm always the one who kisses him. And he never tells me he wants to have sex with me. It's not that I doubt Toru's feelings for me. He was so serious and earnest when he told me he loved me after showing me the painting he did of me.

I lusted after him first. In the beginning, I got excited when I imagined what his face looked like when he came, so I forced him into a physical relationship. Then I would go crazy if we didn't have sex for more than a few days. When he was near me I always wanted to touch him. I only realized that I loved him after we had had sex many times. My body had realized it faster than my mind had. I'm kind of impressed at how honest my body has been.

But Toru is the exact opposite. His feelings came before anything physical.

Does he just love me, but not want to kiss me or have sex with me? Even though he has a cute face, he's still really masculine, so maybe he still can't get used to the thought of having sex with another guy? Or maybe he wants to be the one on top? No, that doesn't seem likely.

But maybe his feelings for me haven't grown to the point where he wants to be physical with me. Have my feelings advanced more than his have? Does he only have sex with me because he loves me, and he knows I want it?

This is why I'm so unreliable and he has to go to Kashiwazaki for advice. Well, actually he recently promised to start coming to me for advice, but he hasn't done that yet. The more I think about all this, the more negative my thoughts become. That's not like me at all.

I remember the last thing Tadashi said before he ran off.

"Art supplies, huh?" I mumble.

I'm not about to tie a ribbon around a paintbrush and give it to Toru or something like that. But I do think some kind of art material would make Toru happy. At the very least, he would definitely use them.

I turn and start walking towards the art supply store near the train station.

When I get there, and I know this sounds obvious, tons of art supplies greet me. I took an art subject before, but I now see a bunch of things that I have no idea what they might be used for. I also realize that I have no idea what kind of paintbrush or colors Toru uses.

"I wonder what I should buy?" I muse out loud.

Truthfully, I'm at a complete loss. Should I buy a box of paints? Or should I buy a bunch of different ones of Toru's favorite color? Wait a second, what *is* Toru's favorite color?

I have a strong image of the color blue, because of that painting he showed me last year. He told me it was

my back. The painting had a bunch of different shades of blue and the title had been "Desire."

Does that mean when he looks at my back he feels desire for me? He wants me after all, right? I'm not completely sure yet.

"Oh?" A voice I don't hear too often resounds in my ears.

"Oh, crap," I accidentally say as I turn around.

"That's not very nice," Keigo Kashiwazaki says cheerfully. "I've never seen you here before. Are you meeting Maiki?"

He looks around as if to see where Toru is. Maybe it's because he's wearing regular clothes instead of his school uniform, but he looks really mature. I hate him for it.

"I guess not, huh?" he says. "I just said goodbye to him at the train station. And he didn't mention anything."

Then don't ask, I think. He's holding a small bouquet of flowers in his hand. Toru said it was a going-away party, so I guess the flowers are a present from the Art Club. If someone gave me flowers, I sure as hell wouldn't be walking all around town with them. I'd want to go home as soon as possible. But I can't actually think of anyone who'd give me flowers...

Kashiwazaki doesn't seem embarrassed when he sees me eyeing the bouquet. "Oh, these? Aren't they nice? The club members gave it to me as a going-away present. I thought I'd go home and paint it, but I remembered I ran out of some colors, so I came here to get them," he explains.

"Really," I say in an uninterested voice.

"What about you? Are you painting something? Or are you here to get something for Maiki?"

Who the hell cares what I'm doing? It's not like we're friends, I want to say. "Not really," I reply instead.

"Well then, I guess it doesn't have anything to do with me," Kashiwazaki says nonchalantly.

Then don't ask!

"Maiki loves this color. He uses it a lot. This one, and this one. Did you know?" Kashiwazaki points to some fat tubes of paints of a brand I haven't heard of.

Really? I think. But, on the other hand, I become angry at his attitude, as if he's the only one who knows Toru. I want to buy Toru a color he likes. But I'd rather die than buy something Kashiwazaki told me about.

"Hey," I say. "You still haven't given up on him?"

"Why would I give up on him?" he replies immediately.

"What? Because Toru and I..."

"I know that," Kashiwazaki says, smiling. "I know full well the two of you are together. But that doesn't mean I have to stop liking him."

"Listen, you..." I start threateningly.

"My feelings are my own," he says firmly, "so, whether or not I like him is my own prerogative."

Even though I know he's right, I can't stop my anger. "Then at least stop trying to get on with him when I'm not around," I snap.

"I can't promise that," he retorts. "Maiki doesn't

belong to you, you know. You guys are only dating. I'm his senpai, so when times get rough he'll come to me."

"That's what he has me for!" I cry out. I can't stand talking to this idiot any longer. I turn on my heel and walk away from him. Even though I wanted to buy Toru a present, this guy has spoiled my mood. I can't stand him, I think as I walk to the door. Then I see a gentle color in the corner of my vision. What's that? I wonder, and stop. What has caught my eyes is a poster hung near the entrance. It looks like a color sample chart. Underneath it is a shelf full of boxes of oil pastels that are shown on the poster.

I feel that the gentle, beautiful colors suit Toru.

"See you," Kashiwazaki says as he walks past me out the door.

I glare at his arrogant-looking back as I grab a box of the pastels in front of me and head towards the cash register.

I forgot to check the price, so I let out a groan when the cashier announces the total. Luckily I just got my allowance. But I come dangerously close to being short. I'm so glad Kashiwazaki isn't here to see this. I would have rather died a painful death than for him to see me in such an embarrassing situation.

Now that I've bought Toru's present, I can't wait for his birthday. I'm usually bad at waiting in general, but this time I'm more impatient than usual. I want to see

Toru's face when he opens the box, so on the way home I invite him over to my house. He agrees even though he complains that it's right before exams. He probably thinks I invited him over to have sex.

Whenever he comes I usually hug him after the door closes, but today I restrain myself and head straight to my room. He notices that something is different, and he develops cautious look on his face.

"Toru, come here," I tell him as I enter my room.

"Okay..." he says, hesitating a bit.

"Why do you look so worried?" I ask. "Come on, close your eyes and hold out your hands."

"What? Why?" he asks, but I ignore him. He closes his eyes and holds out both of his hands. "Ryoji, what are you doing?"

I put the beautifully wrapped present in his hands. "Okay, open your eyes."

Toru opens his eyes and looks at the package in his hands. "What's this?"

"It's a little early," I say, a bit shyly, "but happy birthday. Let's go on a date on the actual day of your birthday, okay? Anyway, I wanted to give you a present."

"Wow, really? Are you sure?" he says.

His smooth cheeks flush pink. He is so cute. Why hadn't I noticed how cute he was when we were just friends? When had I started to notice, anyway? Every time I look at him now, I think he's so adorable I can't stand it. I want to kiss him all over.

"Can I open it?" he asks.

I nod. "Of course."

He unties the ribbon and carefully unwraps the box so that the paper won't rip. I watch him nervously.

As soon as he sees what's inside, his mouth falls open. "Oh..."

He just stands there, dumbfounded. Did I guess wrong? Cold sweat begins to form on my back.

"Can't you use those?" I ask timidly.

"Yeah, I can...um..." Toru raises his face and nods at me. But it seems he's holding something back.

"I'm sorry," I quickly apologize. "I don't know much about art supplies. I just thought the colors were really cool, and that you might like them. But if you don't, you can just throw them away..."

"What are you talking about? These are so expensive!" Toru smiles awkwardly. "I haven't used oil pastels yet, but I've thought about using them given the opportunity. But they are so expensive. And there are so many colors..." He touches the pastels tenderly. "They're beautiful."

"Are you happy?" I ask, peering at his face.

He looks a little troubled as he asks, "Are you sure I can have them? They were expensive to buy, right?"

"Silly, don't worry about that. My wallet's a little empty right now, but I don't care, as long as you're happy." I put my arms around him and hug him. But his expression is still tense. "Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I am. I'd be happy no matter what you gave me, Ryoji."

"No!" I yell.

He looks at me with surprised, tearful eyes.

"Oh, sorry," I apologize again.

"Why did you say that?" he whispers. "You remembered my birthday and bought me a present, those things alone make me happy."

"No, that's not good enough!" I tell him. "I want to make you really happy. I want to give you everything you want!"

"I'm really happy. Thank you."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course!"

"Then give me a kiss to thank me."

As soon as I say that, Toru gazes up at me with a confused look on his face.

"What?" he asks.

Oh, shit. Why do I always speak before I think?

"Never mind. It doesn't mean anything if I tell you to."

"Ryoji? I'll kiss you, if you want," he murmurs.

But I turn my face away from his beautiful pink lips. "I said never mind!" I ramble on as I look back and stare at him. "I only want you to do it when you want to. No matter how much you love me, I wish you would stop doing everything I tell you to. I want you to tell me when you don't want to do things. I don't want you to just put up with things even if you don't like them. Even if you say no to me, I won't resent you for it. Because I love you."

"Ryoji, what are you talking about?" he asks, totally confused.

I sigh. I try to be an open-minded, dependable guy but I end up sounding like a spoiled child. I guess that's why Kashiwazaki always seems to sneer at me.

"I'm not just putting up with things you ask me to.

And I don't do everything you say," Toru says, trying to soothe me.

"Yes, you do!" I argue. "Y-you've never kissed me first, and I'm always the one who initiates sex. I know we're both guys so you might not like doing it. And I know it sounds weird to say this all now."

"What do you mean I might not like doing it because we're guys? This sounds complicated, Ryoji." He wrinkles his forehead and continues to look up at me.

Damn it, don't make that face! When you do, I just want to fuck you! I want to lick those wrinkles on your forehead, you bastard. Don't you know what that face does to me?

"Why are you bringing this up so suddenly, Ryoji?"

"It's not suddenly! I've been thinking about this for a while now. I...I want to get to know you better."

"What?"

I can't bear it anymore, so I hug him.

"I want to get to know you better," I whisper to him. "I want to know everything about you. And I don't mean just physically. I mean I want to know what you like, what you want, what makes you happy. I want to know when you're happy and sad and angry. I want to know everything, and make it mine. I know it might be impossible, but I want to give you everything you want. I want to make you happy. Okay, Toru? Or am I still undependable?"

"Ryoji, what are you talking about?" he says in a tearful voice. "Don't you already know? All of me...is

yours, Ryoji." He gently sets the box of pastels on the floor, and then rubs his hands on my back. Our bodies fit together so perfectly, I can feel our pulses beating. But I can't tell which one is mine and which is his.

"I do want to have sex with you, too, Ryoji," Toru says quietly. "And I want to kiss you. I'm not just putting up with it or doing it because you want it. I really want to do it too."

"Then..." I mumble.

"Have I really not done it first?" he asks.

I nod.

"That's not because I don't want to," he says. "It's just because when I do want to, you always do it first."

"Really?" I ask in a thin voice. I wonder if that's true. So in other words...I kissed him and had sex with him so much he never got the chance to do it first? Or he didn't feel the need to tell me?

"And I know we're both guys," he continues, "but that doesn't mean I don't want to have sex with you."

"I'm sorry," I earnestly apologize, kissing his forehead. "I'm sorry, Toru. I know you said you were going to come to me from now on when something is bothering you, but you hadn't. So I thought maybe I wasn't as good as Kashiwazaki, and I just got worried. I'm sorry."

"What? Why are you bringing his name up now?" Toru wriggles in my arms so he can look at my face again.

"That's why I'm apologizing, silly," I repeat.

"I haven't come to you because nothing's really been going on recently. Isn't it the same with you?"

"I guess so, now that you mention it." The only thing I had really been worried about lately was what to buy for Toru's birthday present, and what I had just told him. I clear my throat nervously. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

"Yeah, what?"

"What do you like about me? A-and you can't say 'everything.'"

"Well, I wouldn't say that anyway," he murmurs teasingly. I squeeze him playfully. He laughs, but then his face becomes serious. "Hmm...even though you're impatient, you always wait for me. And when I'm in trouble, you always seem to rescue me. You're gentle and kind to me, and you watch over me. Just being with you gives me a sense of relief. I can't really explain it, but when I'm with you, I just feel better. I feel like everything's all right. D-did I say something weird?"

"No, you didn't," I quickly tell him. "It's just that that sounds a lot like what you said that time on the phone when you told me you liked Kashiwazaki. Like, he waits for you and he helps you out and stuff."

"That's because..." he trails off.

"What?" I ask, prompting him to go on.

"I *was* talking about you then," Toru confesses. "I couldn't think about anything I really liked about Club President, so I just started describing him, and then halfway through I realized I was talking about you."

What did he just say? So that's what it was? It was actually a confession directed towards me? I start grinning.

"What else?" I urge him on.

"Well before I knew it, I realized I loved you. And being with you feels so good, I never want to leave you. Ryoji?"

As I listen to him, I can't hold back any longer. I push him down on the bed. I kiss his face, everywhere. His ears, his nose, his cheeks and his lips are all so adorable.

"W-wait, Ryoji! Ahh! Why?"

"Because you say cute things. Now you're gonna pay for it!" I tear open his school uniform, exposing his undershirt. I want to make love to him right now. I want to fill myself with him, and I want to fill him with me. I want to make love deeply, and I want us to melt into each other.

"What do you mean? You're the one who made me say it!" he squawks.

"I know, but I can't take it anymore. Mmm, why do I love you so much?" I whisper. Toru gazes up at me with a worried look on his face. "What's wrong? Don't you want to do it now?"

"I do. But first I want you to tell me what you like about me."

"Everything. I love everything about you! Lift up your hips."

He does as I tell him to. I take off his pants and his underwear.

"That's not fair!" he cries out. "You said you can't say everything!"

"But it's the truth!" I reply. "I love everything. I just didn't realize it at first. It's so strange...damn it. I wish we'd met each other sooner so we could've done this more!"

"Still not fair!" Toru puffs out his cheeks indignantly.

I know that he's had a crush on me for a long time, and I feel bad for what I put him through. But I can't go back and change the past. It's true that I never thought we'd have this kind of relationship when we first met.

Since he's a guy, I didn't think of him romantically at first. But I think, somehow, I was always unconsciously searching for him. That's probably why I started to imagine what Toru's face looked like when he came. The feelings that accompanied it were a little late, and I ended up making him sad. So all I can do now is make it better.

I poke his cheek and then reach for the bottle of lube on the nightstand. I smear it inside him. I want to do it more slowly to work him up to it, but I can't wait today. I want to be one with him as soon as I can.

"Mmm...ahh. Ryoji, it's too soon," he moans.

"I'm sorry I'm so impatient," I reply. "I can't wait, though. How is it now? Do you hate me?"

"Silly," Toru says, smiling. "It's okay. Come on. I'm fine now."

It's different than having sex with a woman. I think that every time I have sex with him. I don't want to compare him to women I've slept with before, though. No matter how many times I have sex with him, he's always so masculine. He never crumbles. No matter how much he writhes or moans in my arms, he always feels tight and masculine. I'm always entranced at how beautiful he is.

I slip myself inside him. He's warm and soft. He

lets me in easily. I feel like I'm drowning in ecstasy. As I thrust deeper inside him, I work his dick with my hands. His expression becomes a mixture of pleasure and pain, and he lets out a moan into my chest. This expression is way better than anything I've ever imagined. I never want anyone else to see it. I want it all for myself.

"Mmm...I can't take it..." he cries in a hoarse voice, and I press my lips onto his. He's about to come.

I kiss him over and over again as he lies in my arms.

"Ryoji."

"Hmm?"

"Stop for a little bit."

"Why?"

Toru puts his hands over my mouth. "Because I won't have a chance to kiss you."

I grin. "Will you kiss me?"

"In a little bit."

"What?" I pout, and Toru starts laughing. Suddenly he kisses me right on my lips. "Wha—"

"I wanted to kiss your pouty lips."

"You bastard!" I grab him teasingly and kiss him back.

I'm really drowning in love.

After we kiss for a while, I hold him gently. I rest my forehead on his narrow shoulders and close my eyes. Toru is still for a while, and then he suddenly stirs. He



reaches out and picks up the box of pastels on the floor. He opens the lid again, and strokes them carefully.

I call his name. "Toru?"

He smiles shyly at me. "Do you know how happy I am?" he asks.

"I do." I really feel that I do, now. It's like a gentle aura is emanating from him. It makes me happy that he's happy. I feel like I have no worries. I feel so relaxed. Toru makes me feel better, too. "What do you want next year?" I whisper in his ear.

He laughs. "Next year already? I haven't even had my birthday yet this year, silly!"

I can't help it. I want to make him happy on his birthday next year, and the year after that and the one after that. Forever.

I silently wish for that to come true as I kiss his earlobe. It's a lighter pink than any of the oil pastels.

Afterword

Hello. Or perhaps I should say nice to meet you. Thank you for reading this book. It was my first publication in six months. The comic book version of "Desire – Dangerous Feelings" was published in 2000, so I've been working on this project for a long time now. I was happy just for it to be published in its comic book form, but last year it was made into a CD drama, and now I'm writing the sequel. And of course, I was able to write this novelization of it. I really enjoyed it. I really think it was all possible because of everyone who read and supported the comic book. Thank you so much. In the comic, I wrote several short comic strips, and in the CD there was an original last scene. But in this novel, I wrote a story from Ryoji's point of view. I enjoyed each of those, but what did you think? I'd love to hear any comments.

Regarding the story, this was the kind of pattern I like the most and which I write most often. I'd like to thank Yukine Honami-san, who worked with me on the comic. In this novel version of the story, I was able to add a lot more detail to round up the story. Honami-san's drawings helped me out a lot. Thanks for such wonderful illustrations! I laughed when I saw that Kashiwazaki, a minor character, was in color! I thought, "Wow, he got a promotion!" (laugh)

On a different note, it seems I worried everyone because I hadn't worked for so long. Actually, I was diagnosed with breast cancer in October of last year. In February I had a successful surgery, and now I am doing chemotherapy. I can't go at the same pace I used to, but I'm starting to work again little by little. I'm sorry for everyone I inconvenienced. I'd like to thank my editor for being so understanding. I hope my treatment ends soon and my body goes back to normal so I can continue writing more novels!!! (laugh) But no matter what, I'll always love boys' love. I'll keep walking slowly, so if you keep supporting me, I'd be very happy.

May, 2004
Maki Kazumi

Written By
Maki Kazumi

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Blood Type: A

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Even though I don't have any children, lately I find myself watching kids' shows on NHK. My favorite one is an anime called "Pythagorean Switch". It's supposed to be for four-to six-year-olds, but surprisingly it's popular among adults, too.

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